

From the Fifties to the Nineties:
Two Generations of Counter-Cultural Protests
in American Literature

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Summary

This thesis is a comparative analysis of four counter-cultural novels, as well as a comparison between the counter-culture in the 1950's and the 1990's. In my thesis I have analyzed why and how the main character in each novel has opposed mainstream society. Later I have compared the two books from the 1950's with each other, and repeated this process for the two books from the 1990's to find individual differences as well as patterns that might represent issues common for young people of that time period. In my conclusion I have compared the two time periods, asked why most counter-cultural movements ultimately failed and discussed their legacy for mainstream American culture. Here I have found that counter-cultural behavior in the 1990's is not only similar to that of the 1950's, but also that as the movement of the 1950's failed to have any lasting impact on capitalism and consumerism, but was rather co-opted by mainstream society, this movement failed to solve many of the problems that the next generation inherited in the 1990's.

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Introduction

In this thesis I have chosen to write about four books that have all received both criticism and praise; some have previously been censored and some have even been banned. Though themes and style of writing vary, they have one thing in common: when published they all challenged the conventional world of modern western society, by representing counter-cultures and what the pillars of society might call “misled youth.” To make a comparison both possible and interesting, I have chosen two books credited by many for giving birth to and documenting the counter-culture at its beginnings in the 1950’s, when it grew from being a small minority phenomenon to becoming a social movement. The books are *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger and *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac.

From the 1990’s I have chosen *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk and *Generation X* by Douglas Coupland. Both books carry on the tradition of the books from the 50’s when it comes to representing the life and lifestyle of young “outsiders”, using profanity, criticism of religion and explicit descriptions of sex to create similar negative reactions among the older generation. Even though all chosen books in various ways involve mostly men and masculinity in the counter-cultural protest, the books from the 90’s to a larger degree discuss the loss of masculinity in modern society and outdated family values. The books from the 90’s are also more direct in their criticism of consumerism and of how the wealthy and technologically advanced western societies make groups of young people feel alienated. Why this might be will be discussed in my thesis, alongside how the counter-cultural opposition might have evolved from its birth in the 50’s to a more mature age in the 90’s.

Firstly I will analyze and create counter-cultural profiles of the books from the 50’s and compare them to each other, both thematically and in terms of their motivations, legacy, response and representation and influence of counter-cultural aspects. Next I will repeat the procedure for the books of the 90’s. In my last chapter and in my Conclusion, I will analyze my findings further. Did the books of the 50’s create a genre still viable and copied by the books of the 90’s? Do they represent the same problems and the same genre, but in a different time? Or are the books from the 90’s written as representatives of a counter-cultural opposition to the society created by the generation from the 50’s?

Another theme I will connect to the literature is social class. The rise of teenagers and young adults as a social group and economic target market occurred for the white middle-class in the 50's, and in the 90's they were targeted more than ever as corporate businesses even created tailored-made TV channels to reach out to youth. I will attempt to exemplify how representatives from the middleclass have become these books' main characters, target audience and perhaps inspiration that allowed these books to exist. I have a theory that the counter-culture in many respects is a luxury problem because of the economic boom in post-war America.

The structure of society remained the same in the 90's, but young people's prospects were not as promising. This causes the generation of the 90's to have new challenges that they blame their parent's generation, on top of having the same problems as youngsters in the 50's. This leads me to an attempt to compare these two groups. Is it a repetitive cycle or did the actions of the 50's generation cause a new group to emerge, only to rebel against the first generation of rebels?

Based on these analyses, I can create a counter-cultural profile for each character and each time period, which will make it possible to see patterns and differences and will possibly clarify why, what and how these characters formed a counter-cultural opposition against the establishment.

Chapter One: *The Catcher in the Rye*

The Catcher in the Rye was written by Jerome David Salinger (better known as J.D. Salinger), and originally published in 1951.¹ It is written in the first person and the narrator's voice seems to be located in a psychiatric institution in the Los Angeles area. (1,213) The narrator is Holden Caulfield, a 16-year-old boy from New York who struggles to find his place in life. When the reader meets Holden, he has just gotten himself expelled from Pencey Preparatory, a boarding school in Pennsylvania. (2) This is not the first school Holden has been expelled from, seemingly with no regrets. Holden is in general critical of his fellow students and teachers and the emerging capitalist and commodity-based society of the fifties in general. He repeatedly calls those he dislikes for "phonies".² (4)

In this chapter I will attempt to analyze how Holden expresses his counter-cultural attitudes and social criticism against both his fellow students and the "establishment" of the adult world. I will describe why he is opposed to the attitudes and lifestyles of most of the people he is surrounded by, what tools and means he uses in his oppositional reactions, and the results of this. I have tried to describe the kind of world Holden would like to live in and what I believe to be the reasons why. From this I have been able to create what one can call a counter-cultural profile of Holden and *The Catcher in the Rye*. This can be used in my comparison with the three other books.

Holden has to return to his family in New York City, something he dreads, as he knows his parents will be both disappointed and outraged. His mother is still mourning the death of his younger brother Allie from leukemia, who, along with Holden's little sister Phoebe, seems to be the only person he holds in high regard. In *The Catcher in the Rye* we embark on a journey with Holden from his last few days in school through his first few days in New York.

During his journey Holden socializes with a lot of people, from classmates and their parents to dates, taxi drivers and prostitutes. Holden rarely seems to like any of the people he meets, continuously pointing out what he views as "phony" about each person. The meaning of the word phony is according to the Oxford dictionaries: not genuine; a fraudulent person or thing.³ Holden values honesty and integrity above all, and he measures everybody he meets in order to decide to what degree they have broken with

¹ Warren French, *J.D. Salinger* (Twayne Publishers, 1963), 28.

² Warren French. *J.D. Salinger*, 4, Martin Halliwell, *Twentieth Century American Culture, American Culture in the 1950s* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 66.

³<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/phoney?q=phony>

these basic values. Holden usually does not like what his peers, capitalism, popular culture or the authorities stand for, believing the authorities surrounding him mold his peers into people with double standards who only wish to please or impress each other. Holden uses a lot of sarcasm in his dialog with them to show his disgust and distance to what they represent. He calls many of his conversations “horsing around” (21) and seems to converse only to pass time, often saying to people acting in or representing views he does not approve of, “you are such a prince”. (24) Although he is sociable throughout the novel, one gets the impression of Holden being a loner who seems to represent a different view of the world than the people he is surrounded by. This development seems to increase throughout the book as he distances himself further and further from people and the normal and accepted values of society. Toward the end of the book he states that “he wishes to move out in the wilderness, do odd jobs, marry a mute and only have his brother or sister visit him once in a while.” (165,198) His 10-year old sister Phoebe is devastated when he wants to leave, she begs Holden to stay or to take her with him. In the last few pages he apparently gives in to her pressure, as he seems to realize that his solution of withdrawal will not help protect those he cares about against the inevitable exposure to the phoniness in society.

Although J.D. Salinger is not the only American author from the 1950’s to use profanity, anti-Christian messages and explicit sexual references, it caused huge reactions from the public at the time of the novel’s publication.⁴ This was at least partially caused by the paranoid attitude of the American Government in the midst of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. During the McCarthy Era, oppositional thoughts often had negative consequences, as many in the USA were so influenced by anti-Communist propaganda that music, film or literature that could be interpreted to have an anti-American message could be censored or banned and in rare cases authors and publishers might be prosecuted.⁵ However, at the same time the middle class enjoyed a period of prosperity as both increased personal income and many products of the new technology characterized middle class households across America.⁶ As a result of this, a new and young demographic group of people emerged, namely teenagers and young adults, and they looked for idols and ideas elsewhere than their parents’ generation.⁷

⁴ Martin Halliwell, *Twentieth Century American Culture, American Culture in the 1950s*, 2,53

⁵ http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/McCarthyism/HUAC_Rise_AntiCommun.html

⁶ <http://www.duke.edu/~ajc6/7up/Conformity.htm>

⁷ Martin Halliwell, *Twentieth Century American Culture, American Culture in the 1950s*, 2-3

According to Martin Halliwell, Holden Caulfield represents a type of anti-hero who in many ways was typical of postwar literature.⁸ There might be many reasons for this oppositional behavior, but one major reason I believe is the emergence of teenagers as a definable social group. With increased prosperity in middle-class families and fewer worries about their personal future, young people did not need to enter the workforce as early as was the case for their parents' generation, giving them time to study, travel, gather in groups with peers their own age, ponder over the world's problems and attempt to fulfill dreams instead of "earning money for their daily bread." They were bored with the conventional and unexciting world of their elders, and this opened up for the evolution of several forms of counter-cultural protest.⁹ Though not yet members of the Baby Boom generation, they had already become a large demographic group with higher education and economic purchasing power and were a tempting target for various prospering markets.¹⁰ Most essentially I think Holden Caulfield represents an upper-middle-class American boy who does not yet have to worry about survival and making a living in the future. He is placed in school to be molded into what his parents' generation and their society believe are good young boys, in order to acquire the skills they think their world will demand from these young men in the future.¹¹ The Second World War was over, and optimism and normalization were the name of the game, but where should young men place themselves in this booming society full of expectations?¹²

One of the main institutions that Holden observes is the school system. He is highly critical of both the adults in charge and his peers, and from this, questions about the purpose of the institutions and people's attitudes toward them arise in his mind.¹³ The distaste for the school system creates a wish in Holden to avoid having to live in or make a living in the world he is surrounded by. (200) Holden values honesty and integrity, and is under the impression that the morality instilled in students at school has eradicated these values. Pencey has a motto: "Since 1888 we have been molding boys into splendid clear-thinking young men." (2) And Holden's thoughts of it: "Strictly for the birds. They don't

⁸ Martin Halliwell, *Twentieth Century American Culture, American Culture in the 1950s*, 60

⁹ <http://homepages.gac.edu/~jcullip/workexamples/mea.html> <http://www.medialit.org/reading-room/savers-spenders-how-children-became-consumer-market>

¹⁰ <http://www.enotes.com/1950-lifestyles-social-trends-american-decades/youth>

¹¹ Christopher Brookeman, "Pencey Preppy: Cultural Codes in *The Catcher In the Rye*" In *The American Novel: New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye*, Edited by Jack Salzman, (New York, The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1991), 59

¹² <http://homepages.gac.edu/~jcullip/workexamples/mea.html>

¹³ Christopher Brookeman, "Pencey Preppy: Cultural Codes in *The Catcher In the Rye*" In *The American Novel: New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye*, Edited by Jack Salzman, 59-65

do any damn more molding at Pencey than they do at any other school. And I didn't know anybody there that was splendid and clear-thinking and all.”(2) As he resents school and most of the people he meets there, he distances himself from it, and out of his negative reactions his personal counter-cultural protest emerges. Holden does not seem to lack skills academically; the reader is given the impression that he is both literate and generally intelligent, and his history teacher Mr. Spencer, whom he visits before he departs, seems to respect him even though Holden seems to have failed his subject on purpose. (11) He simply does not wish to be at Pencey Prep, and because of this he performs badly in most of his subjects and sometimes even seems to do his schoolwork in an unconventional manner so as to provoke his teachers or simply make a statement. (12) This is exemplified by part of his exam answer in history: “That is all I know about the Egyptians. I can't seem to get very interested in them although your lectures are very interesting. It is all right with me if you flunk me though, as I am flunking everything except English anyway.” (12) It is all the phonies Holden has such distaste for, and when it comes to the grownups involved in Pencey Prep, he believes most of their actions are false and motivated by a wish to gain popularity with the parents or to enhance their economic benefits. I believe this to be a causal factor for Holden often doing the opposite of what is expected of him.

Besides socializing with his history teacher, he spends his last days at Pencey Prep socializing with fellow students. His socializing revolves around his roommate, a senior named Stradlater, and the boy in the neighboring room, another senior named Robert Ackley. During the early pages of the novel we get clear signals that Holden intentionally distances himself from the school and his peers, and as with the staff of grown-ups, he also acts unconventionally as a rebellion against what he sees as phony in his fellow students. Initially he shows this by stating that he has no interest in watching the football game everybody is attending, giving the reader the impression that he finds it pointless and would only have gone if there were more girls in attendance. (3) He strongly dislikes the excluding cliques and how everybody strives for popularity by denigrating other students. Holden's distaste for teenage cliques is where I believe he differs from other young people involved in counter-cultural-movements in postwar America. When one is a part of a counter-cultural movement, one is usually deemed an outsider by the dominant society. However, the Beats for instance gathered collectively and tried to project their ideas through a variety of works while seemingly seeking camaraderie, creating their own social group. Holden is seemingly at odds with, or skeptical to so many, that he wants to go

through his protest alone, only seeking moral support from a few people above his age group instead of searching to join peers with a potentially similar mind-set.

His roommate Stradlater is what Holden calls “a handsome bastard”. (32) Stradlater is what you would call “a jock” when you refer to social divisions at American high schools and colleges. According to Holden, Stradlater is handsome, popular and a pretty nice guy. Nonetheless, he is a phony in Holden’s mind and he also believes himself to be more intelligent than him. Holden is very curious and jealous about his date, Jane Gallagher, on whom he has a crush and finds very intelligent. It seems as if he can’t resist provoking and criticizing, and he begins “horsing around” with Stradlater in seeming disappointment that Jane has chosen to go out with a guy Holden believes has worse values than himself. My first thought before I had read further into the book and become more acquainted with Holden as a person, was the impression that he is quite under-stimulated, stirring up commotion everywhere he goes. However, he can compromise as long as he can set some terms, as when Stradlater manages to convince Holden to do his homework for him. Holden is supposed to describe a room in a house, but writes a paper describing his younger brother’s baseball glove, which he likes because Allie used to write nice poems on it. (38) Stradlater’s response to this is, “you don’t do one thing as you are supposed to”. (41) I think Stradlater’s response clearly symbolizes Holden’s counter-cultural attitude towards the school and group mentality. He seems to disregard both what the school as an institution would expect or want from a paper like that, and what a popular student such as Stradlater considers “normal” or “correct”. Holden seems to know that this is a provocation, but my impression is that he also chose to write the paper in an unconventional manner because it gives him the opportunity to show the reader some of his own unconventional values. To back up the statement that Holden deliberately disregards authority and the social expectations they have of him, it is worth mentioning that after his argument with Stradlater, he lights himself a cigarette in their room because “it drove Stradlater crazy when you broke any of the rules.” (41) This attitude is seen repeatedly from Holden towards both the system he is caught in and his fellow students who attempt to fit in, instead of colliding with the school and other systems dedicated to the development and education of young people.

Holden repeatedly uses exaggeration and sarcasm in his description of people. He describes his neighbor Ackley as “a nasty guy with his mouth full of peas and potatoes that barges in on him 85 times a day” (19) and Stradlater as a guy “who thinks he is the most handsome guy in the Western Hemisphere.” (27)

As mentioned above, Holden does not like many of the people he knows. It becomes quite clear early on that his strongest dislike is for the market powers and powerful people in society that have created and promote the systems and values he sees and dislikes in people. He begins this criticism of capitalism and phoniness on page (16), where a wealthy man in the funeral and undertaking business named Ossenburger, whom his school building is named after, holds a speech about “how one should always talk to Jesus where you are.” Holden calls him “a big phony bastard who probably asks Jesus for a few more stiff” (16) and continues by observing that “Ossenburger probably just puts the bodies in a sack and dumps them in the river.” (17) I interpret this not so much as an attack on Christianity itself, but on how people use religion to earn a lot of money or to build an image as a good person. Holden clearly does not think much of what Ossenburger does for a living, nor does he approve of the fact that he shows up displaying his wealth in a big Cadillac and hypocritically attempts to inspire the students to become God-fearing young men. (16,17) My impression is that Ossenburger is the perfect example of a phony, representing everything Holden finds wrong and repulsive in society. Holden clearly thinks Ossenburger is a hypocrite who uses religion as a motivational factor to become rich, and tries to impress people by driving a Cadillac for all to see. If Ossenburger is the kind of person who gets a school-building named after him, it is not surprising that Holden wants out, and spends much of his time criticizing and avoiding school institutions that are a part of the phony world he despises.

Throughout the book Holden continues displaying his negative views of people with wealth, power or fame; people he believes are not true to whom they really are. Included in this criticism are musicians and actors, and especially the fans that adore them. He observes that “people are morons who laugh and clap at the wrong time and that if he was a famous actor or piano player and these people liked him, he would hate it.” (84) He applies strict rules to himself in order to “keep it real”, and tells the reader how he was once offered a role in a movie, but “anybody that hates the movies as much as I do would be a phony to be in one.” (77)

However, Holden is very interested in girls. When it comes to dating, he tends to relax his requirements of honesty, but not without complaining about it. His date Sally Hayes likes both celebrities and the movies, and therefore he decides to take her to a play and intends to impress her by getting tickets to a show with the famous Lunts in it.¹⁴ His

¹⁴ <http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/people/A0830632.html>

motivation seems to be his desire to impress her, and to impress the world around him by dating a “hot” girl like Sally. He gives the impression that he does not like Sally’s personality that much, saying that she wishes to be sophisticated and that she is “the queen of phonies.” (118) He even thinks she is so stunning that he wants to marry her at first sight and manages to steal a kiss in the taxicab. (125) Holden admits that the play is not that bad, but still thinks the main characters are showing off and that the crowd is a bunch of “jerks” that try to impress each other by talking loudly during the intermission about their interpretations and knowledge of the play. Name-dropping especially irritates him as it exemplifies how the crowd attempts to impress each other not by their own talents, but by referring to people they claim to know who are famous or well liked. His attraction to Sally soon evaporates; Holden gives her a long lecture on all the things he finds phony in NYC from cab drivers to boys she talks to who like the Lunts. (130) However, he still turns around and asks Sally to escape to the woods with him. (132) Holden does not quite know how to react when Sally, not surprisingly says no and criticizes his views and ideas. He strikes back with criticism and cuts the date short. After she starts to cry, he does not show signs of empathy or regret; he admits to the reader that he apologizes because he does not want her to tell her intimidating father about his bad behavior. (134)

Usually in the book, Holden seems to be pretty insightful, fair and balanced and often willing to please others, such as bragging to a mother about her son who he actually thinks is “a phony bastard” and charming and donating large sums to two nuns. (54,110) An observation I have made which is backed up by Christopher Brookeman, is that most of Holden’s criticism towards society comes from a prep school boy’s point of view.¹⁵ The phonies he mentions repeatedly throughout the book are usually young people like himself enjoying various commodities targeted towards them, such as the movies, bars and school sports games, which he takes a stand against. The grownups he finds phony are the ones responsible for creating or supporting these institutions or serving in them. In many ways Holden lives in a small world, but the prep school system was common all over the USA, and his home city of New York has been and is a city that usually sets the standard for norms and fads in both business and popular culture. This is why I believe Holden manages to expose what can be viewed as phoniness in society, which is often driven by fame and money and displaying false attitudes to achieve this. For instance, he finds it ridiculous that his school always serves the students beef on Saturdays, well knowing that

¹⁵ Jack Salzman, *The American Novel, New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye*: (Christopher Brookeman, *Pencey Preppy: Cultural Codes in The Catcher in the Rye*), 58

parents visit on Sundays and will easily be impressed if they ask their sons what they had for dinner yesterday. (35)

Postwar America was a society where affluent parents in many respects passed on the responsibility of raising their children to boarding schools. In a setting where teenage boys or girls were secluded from grownups, and surrounded by peers their own age, a prep school can be viewed as an institution where upper-middle and upper-class boys are gathered together to be shaped and trained to fit into a corporate grown-up society, in other words molded into what the older generations wanted and expected.¹⁶ Such a prep school system may be seen to contradict the traditional American individualistic culture of every man for himself and the American Dream. Holden's adolescent rebellion is also against this institution that tries to shape him and his peers into one conformist monoculture, as he seems to despise both well-wishers and others attempting to guide or advise him. Based on the fact that he has attended three of these prep schools, it is no wonder that his criticism and commentary are often focused on the prep school system. (4,10,13) He does not only respond negatively to the authorities that attempt to shape him, but also to the social gatherings of the students, where everybody attempts to fit into cliques with their own exclusive social codes.

Holden is a typical outsider who often looks from the outside and in when he comments on his surrounding society. However, I partly agree with the observation that Holden can be classified as both an insider and an outsider.¹⁷ Brookeman argues for such a view, because Holden knows most of the social codes, such as the codes for dating, and is often in need of company, which he seeks in fellow students, old acquaintances and even cab drivers.¹⁸ I do not believe him to be a real insider, because he does not seem to fit in anywhere he goes, but the fact that he knows the social codes, whether it involves talking to parents, golfing or dating shows that he might have been raised to be one. This I believe is important for the validity of his social criticism. Had he been so alone that he had no contact with or insight into these institutions, it would have been much harder to take his observational criticism seriously. Holden also seems to make some attempts to fit in, not with everybody, but with people who he looks up to or wants to learn from. This is his attempt to find some security in a world he distrusts. This is why Holden likes the Museum

¹⁶ Ibid, 57-68

¹⁷ Harold Bloom, *Bloom's Major Literary Characters, Holden Caulfield*, (Chelsea House Publishers, 2005) 2

¹⁸ Jack Salzman, *The American Novel, New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye*: Christopher Brookeman, *Pencey Preppy: Cultural Codes in The Catcher in the Rye*, 62

so much, because here nothing changes, unlike the people he is surrounded by.¹⁹ These people all disappoint Holden throughout his journey; they go from being at least partly admired to becoming satirized along with the rest of society he has been raised to be a part of.²⁰

Carl Luce is a young man Holden might not admire so much as a person, but he is curious about and jealous of his alleged sexual experience. He is a slightly older friend from a previous school who loved to brag and gossip. (142) These are traits Holden usually does not find positive in people, but once again his sexual curiosity trumps his values. When they meet up in New York, Luce has apparently become a pretentious college student who spends most of his time in a sexual relationship with an older Asian woman, but has become too cool to talk to Holden about it; instead he tells Holden how “immature his mind is.” (148) Holden also visits an old English teacher named Mr. Antolini from his previous school Elkton Hills. Holden is still in hiding from his parents and needs a place to stay. Mr. Antolini is a man Holden had a lot of respect for as a teacher (“one could kid around without losing respect for him.”) (174) The reader is given the impression that Mr. Antolini is one of the few grown-ups Holden has respect for. The suicide of James Castle after being bullied at Elkton Hills seems to have moved Holden, and it occurred not too long after his brother’s death. Mr. Antolini was the only one to take action by retrieving the body. (174) This seems to have left a good impression on Holden. Mr. Antolini frequently visited Holden after he was expelled from Elkton Hills, displaying to Holden an act of friendship and care, even though Holden’s expulsion signifies that he was a failure in terms of the rules and norms of Elkton Hills. (180)

A hint that Mr. Antolini is a man who goes against the grain is that he is married to a much older woman who according to Holden’s exaggerated comment “is about sixty years older than him.” (181) Most importantly, Mr. Antolini advised Holden’s Brother D.B. not to take his writing to Hollywood as he thought he was too gifted. (181) As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Holden despises the movies, and he criticizes his brother, whose writing he used to respect before he decided to “prostitute” himself in Hollywood when he became successful. (2) Mr. Antolini shares Holden’s view on this matter, and at the same time shows that he values integrity, which is a major point for Holden in his hatred of the phonies. Holden believes that prep schools, capitalism and market powers

¹⁹ Malcolm M. Marsden, *If you really want to know: A Catcher casebook*: Hugh Maclean, From “*Conservatism in American Fiction*”, 15

²⁰ Ibid

corrupt young people and as I have mentioned, he wants to save children before they get too exposed to these detrimental influences. Mr. Antolini is both a grown-up and a teacher at a prep school, and he has somehow managed to avoid becoming a phony, and in fact maintained much integrity. This I believe must be a beacon of hope for Holden showing how it might be possible to withstand the pressures from the dominant society and institutions, even while living in it. During Holden's visit however, Mr. Antolini disappoints him (191), just as Carl Luce, Sally Hayes, Jane Gallagher and his older brother D.B. have.

During their time together, Mr. Antolini does not do anything that Holden especially criticizes. He tries to straighten Holden out by saying that, "but I can very clearly see you dying nobly, one way or another, for some highly unworthy cause." (188) Mr. Antolini continues to instruct Holden by quoting a psychoanalyst, "The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one." (188) He acknowledges that he understands that Holden is at a crossroads in life where many young men sometimes are, in a situation "where they are in search of something more that they do not believe society can supply them with, and that many give up before they even get started." (187) Mr. Antolini is referring to Holden's path at school and life in general and attempts to motivate him. Mr. Antolini even says that it is "common to be sickened by human behavior for a period in life" (189), but since Holden apparently "loves knowledge," (189) he should "apply himself in school" (189) and "he will find answers dear to his heart." (189) My interpretation is that there might be answers ahead of Holden if he cleans up his act and attempts to live for something that he is enthusiastic about, but that he wants to make this choice himself and not have it forced upon him by adults who think they know better. Holden clearly does not like being confronted and analyzed, and in my opinion he has contacted Mr. Antolini not only to get a roof over his head, but also to get some reassurance and support when it comes to his choices and ideas. Holden is a complex character, he seems to want support from Mr. Antolini, but when he suggests that Holden should face his issues with a different approach, necessarily implying that he has to compromise his values, Holden pulls back and reclaims his regular role as a self-proclaimed anti-hero-outcast. Mr. Antolini seems to suggest that Holden should be patient and work for his beliefs, understanding that Holden is in a critical phase of his young life. Holden's refusal to listen gives me the impression that even though he wants to save others, he does not want to be saved himself, basing his refusal on what seems to be a

blend of integrity and stubbornness. This can be connected to a statement Holden makes later when he is watching Phoebe ride a carousel. He observes Phoebe and all the other kids grab for a golden ring and says “The thing with kids is if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it’s bad if you say something to them.” (211) What Holden is saying is that you might have the answer, but you have to let the kids find out for themselves. In other words being a “catcher in the rye” is not a viable strategy. The same rule is applied to life in general. According to Warren French, this can be connected to Holden’s conversation with Mr. Antolini, because Antolini seems to have Holden’s answers, but he needs to find this out for himself.²¹

When Holden goes to sleep, Mr. Antolini sits down by the couch and starts patting Holden’s head. Holden reacts by rushing up and leaving the premises. Holden seems very scared by Mr. Antolini’s behavior, and adds that he has known too many perverts in school and interprets the behavior as “flitty” (gay). (192-193)²² Holden does not go into too much detail about his distaste for homosexuals, but he also uses the word “flit” negatively in the same sentences as he refers to perverts, whom he seems to fear.²³ It is a sad scene in the book, because essentially it exemplifies that Holden has been let down or betrayed so many times by “phonies” that he completely rejects one of his few allies in society.

I think the scene with Mr. Antolini leads to a turning-point for Holden. Previously he has approached acquaintances, both his own age and older, in what may seem to be a reaching out for support, further knowledge and understanding. After his visit to Mr. Antolini fails, he begins to realize that nobody seems to think like him. He sees that people he had faith in can also be corrupted by society, or at least fail to understand his real needs. I believe, however, that Mr. Antolini has not been corrupted, at least to a lesser degree than the others Holden is surrounded by. He is mistakenly associated with the ones who actually failed Holden while he attempts to help him, only because of Holden’s fear of anything considered homosexual. The fact that Holden does not seem to find anyone who agrees with him does not cause him to reevaluate his opinions or mindset. Instead he begins to seek more contact with Phoebe and younger children, since he naturally views their minds as more pure and not yet corrupted. This is when he starts seeing himself as a

²¹ Warren French. “The Artist as a Very Nervous Young Man”, In *Bloom’s Major Literary Characters: Holden Caulfield*, Edited by Harold Bloom, 67

²² <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=flit>

²³ Maxwell Geismar, “American Moderns: From Rebellion to Conformity”, In *If you really want to know: a Catcher casebook*, edited by Malcolm M. Marsden, 45

Catcher in the Rye, inspired by a Robert Burns poem named “Comin’ thro’ the rye” that Phoebe has recited for him earlier.²⁴ This expression is connected to one of his visions of himself where “he is by the backdrop of a cliff hidden waiting to catch and protect the playing children who might fall off the edge.” (173) This emphasizes how much Holden wishes to protect the minds and lives of children, especially his sister Phoebe, from becoming too exposed to the various people and institutions he believes will turn them into phonies. This is ultimately what makes him give up his tentative plans for escape to the forest and instead stay and confront the trouble he has coming with his parents. (207)²⁵

Holden has all along been critical of the establishment in society. He has distanced himself further and further from people and accepted the role of an outcast. As Arthur Heiserman & James E. Miller, Jr. put it, “Holden refuses to compromise with adulthood and his heroism drives him berserk.”²⁶ Ironically, his wish to escape is created by his love for his fellow human beings and his wish to save them. These two critics also point this out by saying two things: “He can only become a catcher in the rye in this world by leaving it, and that to do good in this world he has to become a ”bad boy” who confounds the society of men.”²⁷ By this they probably mean that he has to leave or disconnect himself from the world he is surrounded by and become “uncivilized” in order to preserve his goodness and protect the ones who are yet unspoiled. This strengthens my previous argument that he himself seeks an escape from the world and seeks the world of children, not only to save his sister, but also to free himself from all norms and pressures that make him so anxious about phoniness. As a child he had all that he now tries to preserve, and this is probably why Phoebe is so important to him, because she has become his symbol of childlike truth and innocence. During what he has planned to be his last meeting with Phoebe, I think Holden realizes that his motivation to live a solitary life is really based on his wish to reject the values of the world around him. His choice to stay might not only be based on his realization that isolation might not offer him the consolation he needs, but also on his wish to protect his sister.

This can be backed up by the observations made by Miller and Heiserman “Holden is sixteen, and he can never be less,”²⁸ “and there is no place to go- -save, of course a

²⁴ http://allpoetry.com/poem/8439179-Comin_Thro_The_Rye-by-Robert_Burns

²⁵ Martin Halliwell, *Twentieth Century American Culture, American Culture in the 1950s*, 67

²⁶ Arthur Heiserman, James E. Miller, Jr., “J.D. Salinger: Some Crazy Cliff, *Western Humanities Review* x, 1956”, In *If you really want to know: a Catcher casebook*, edited by Malcolm M. Marsden, 18,

²⁷ *Ibid*, 18

²⁸ *Ibid*, 18

California Psychiatrist's couch."²⁹ This statement I believe is an interpretation of what answers Holden might have come up with as well as an outside approach to view Holden's options. They point out that fleeing society will not prevent it from being phony, and that Holden will have to face this fact. Escape to a solitary life will also put an end to any possibility of offering protection to Phoebe or anyone else for that matter. In realizing this, I believe Holden unhappily acknowledges that what he thought was an oppositional answer to combat the phoniness would not work. His love for young people motivated his counter-cultural attitude where he wanted to become a savior, "a catcher in the rye," and leave society behind. This love for human beings, especially Phoebe, also made him realize that he had to find other ways to keep up his counter-cultural opposition.

I also sense some arrogance in Holden's attitudes, if he believes that Hollywood, Broadway shows and school institutions bombard youth with values that inevitably turn them into hypocrites, who will compromise all goodness and integrity to assure their own popularity or fame. It is arrogant to believe that he is the only one to resist or see through this scheme. Holden shows great insight when he manages to pinpoint what factors in society create the phony values in people, and he is mature enough to choose to stay and face his problems and to sacrifice himself to save his sister. However, he is immature in his unrealistic choice of only seeking backward towards childhood instead of accepting advice on how he could face his issues as a grown-up. His choice to stay can be viewed as Holden's first step into accepting that he is an adult. Through his counter-cultural process of opposing the adult world in an attempt to re-enter the world of the child, he has actually begun to grow up. Holden repeatedly claims to be immature and never "acting his age" (9), but his actions sometimes contradict him. He holds eloquent conversations with parents, nuns and older girls in bars. He is capable of taking care of himself in New York, by booking hotel rooms by himself, and he passes time by engaging in adult activities such as going to bars. Most importantly, though, his opposition against the establishment seems based on concern for his fellow man. He is saddened to see how hypocritical society has made people become, and he is both grown-up and brave enough to confront people he knows with it. When he gains no support or understanding for his oppositional actions, he wants to escape geographically to seclude himself from society's phoniness. This is when he finds out that he wants to focus on the world of children, where phoniness is not a part of behavior. I have observed that Holden seems immature in seeking out the past and

²⁹ Ibid, 17

relating to children instead of facing his adolescent challenges. Still, while Holden attempted to look back, he came to terms with the situation and began to grow up, but as he no longer had a solution to his problems, this disillusionment caused his collapse.

Holden opposes the majority culture in postwar America. At the same time it is ironic that he in many senses represents something very American in two ways. Firstly, he embodies the old individualist notion of being true to yourself in the land of the free, and secondly he represents the anti-hero which had been very popular in American literature and which has caused Holden to be compared to two extremely popular classics from earlier time periods, *The Great Gatsby* and *Huckleberry Finn*.³⁰ Both characters can be compared to Holden in many different ways. Huckleberry Finn is on a quest on a raft, while helping an escaped slave seek freedom. According to John Seelye, Holden seeks an equivalent to Huck's raft to find isolation and safety: "Holden dreams of a Huck Finn-like asylum, a cabin in the woods".³¹ Jay Gatsby attempts to impress the world by constantly hosting parties in the hope that his long lost love will attend one of them and come back to him. Like Holden, Gatsby is "surrounded by a phony world as people only come to exploit him."³² The list of comparisons is far longer, but the main point is that these characters went against the grain, had counter-cultural opinions of contemporary society or acted against it. The legacy of both books is that they are both considered great American classics. While controversial at the time of their publication, they later became widely respected, perhaps because challenging mainstream society to become free is a principle the USA itself is based on. In politics, films and popular culture Americans up to this day talk about the notions of freedom, the American Dream and individualism. Perhaps this is why oppositional characters such as Huckleberry Finn, Jay Gatsby and Holden Caulfield, when people eventually get over the shock that their values and views are challenged, become viewed as even "typically" American.

There can be many reasons why Holden wishes to oppose the systems of postwar America and become a *Catcher in the Rye*. His attitudes can be seen as an attack on the school system and products created by grown-ups to shape the younger generation to fit into what they consider as suitable to carry on traditions, business and conventional values in society. We see Holden oppose and distance himself from all these aspects throughout *The Catcher in the Rye* as he sees dishonesty in them. As Brookeman puts it: "Holden is

³⁰ James Lundquist, *J.D. Salinger*, 40, 41

³¹ John Seelye, "Holden at the Museum", In *The American Novel: New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye*, Edited by Jack Salzman, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1991), 27

³² James Lundquist, *J.D. Salinger*, 41

skeptical of the process of character formation and isolation in school institutions.”³³ In many ways Holden represents the one who goes against the pack. In many respects he might just be a free spirit or a person who does not fit in and chooses to fight. However, I also agree with the critics who think that he also has deeper motivations, perhaps unknown to himself. His choice to protect children can thus be viewed as a logical solution to avoid the world of phony teenagers and grown-ups, but it can also be viewed as a way of processing the deaths that haunt him throughout the book as he wants to go back to his childhood before these deaths occurred. As Peter Shaw puts it, “Allie is the source of the rescue fantasy, then, but not its object. In Holden’s case the reaction formation manifested in the catcher fantasy is combined with another kind of guilt that may follow the death of a sibling, that felt by virtue of being a survivor.”³⁴

His brother Allie died of cancer, which obviously cannot be blamed on the adult world, while James Castle is harassed in school to the point where he chooses to commit suicide.³⁵ Holden’s counter-cultural reaction to school and modern society can be connected to his emotions around these two deaths, because his optimal choice would be to go back to his days with Allie when things were innocent and simple. When it comes to James Castle, he seems to represent the downside of preparatory school institutions, as he is bullied by a group of about seven students for not going back on his critical words targeted at one of them. (170) He became a victim of peer pressure from the social cliques Holden hates which are established in institutions where young men are isolated together.³⁶ Holden could do nothing to prevent these deaths. When it comes to James Castle, he blames the adult world that attempts to mold him as they stand behind the institution where such bullies are created. The teenage cliques seem to be a repetitive phenomenon: “In every school I’ve gone to, all the athletic bastards stick together.”(43) Holden’s wish to stay in a naïve and uncivilized world may also have been strengthened by his older brother D.B. selling out to Hollywood; in many respects this represents the opposite of Allie in Holden’s memory. In earlier years D.B. seems to have been quite an idol to Holden, but even he cannot resist the temptation to sell out for success and fame in the adult world.³⁷

³³Christopher Brookeman, “Pencey Preppy: Cultural Codes in The Catcher In the Rye” In *The American Novel: New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye*, Edited by Jack Salzman, 60

³⁴Peter Shaw. “Love and Death in The Catcher in the Rye”, In *The American Novel: New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye*, Edited by, Jack Salzman, 104

³⁵James Lundquist, *J.D. Salinger*, 42

³⁶Christopher Brookeman, “Pencey Preppy: Cultural Codes in The Catcher In the Rye” In *The American Novel: New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye*, Edited by Jack Salzman, 64

³⁷James Bryan. “The Psychological Structure of The Catcher in the Rye”, In *Bloom’s Major Literary Characters: Holden Caulfield*, Edited By Harold Bloom, (Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publisher, 2005), 33

Holden's natural reaction to these deaths and his brother "prostituting himself in Hollywood"³⁸ is then to oppose what the adult world represents. I believe these experiences have influenced Holden's counter-cultural attitudes and motivated his wish to become a *Catcher in the Rye* for his Sister.³⁹

Holden's counter-cultural profile comes out in his role as the lonely anti-hero who uses withdrawal and isolation as tactics to avoid the establishment. He eventually saw no other way to take on or fight the adult world, as it is inevitable that you have to grow up and in his mind sell out your values. Love for his little sister Phoebe causes Holden to surrender and perhaps he can win a small victory by watching over her as she enters the world of teenagers, prep schools and the movies, although while watching her play he acknowledges that some of the facts of life have to be experienced firsthand by each individual and not told them by people who "know better."

³⁸ Ibid P.33

³⁹ Martin Halliwell, *Twentieth Century American Culture, American Culture in the 1950s*, 67

Chapter Two: *On The Road*

On the Road is a semi-autobiographical novel about Jack Kerouac's many spontaneous travels across the USA and even into Mexico. Although the characters' names are fictional, most of them have real-life counterparts. These characters were often people with leading roles in the up-and-coming 1950's Beat generation. The book was written in 1951, but it had to be revised before it could be published in 1957.⁴⁰ Not only did Kerouac receive praise for the vivid writing style he calls "spontaneous prose", a number of the book's chapters were jotted down on paper napkins and scrap paper giving the reader an intense feeling of high tempo spontaneous travel.⁴¹ The book is also significant since many considered it controversial while others saw it as one of the best books to define a generation of restless Beat artists on a collision course with mainstream America.⁴² The book did not only portray these young people's restless travel bug, but also depicted what many saw as an immoral flirting with drugs, casual sex and heavy drinking.⁴³

The main character of the book is Sal Paradise, who is also the narrative voice while Dean Moriarty (Neal Cassady) has the second largest part in the story, both in size and importance. Sal's life is at a standstill, he has just gotten divorced and survived an illness; he is living in an aunt's house in New Jersey attempting to write when he meets Dean, who turns his life upside down. Dean is a carefree man, an ex-convict seemingly born on the road, he is full of energy and open for spontaneous adventure to get his "kicks". Sal's friend Chad King introduces him to Dean, because Dean wants to learn about Nietzsche and learn to write. As Sal is the writer in the gang, they team up in what ends up in late-night drinking sprees with Carlo Marx (Allen Ginsberg), another leading character in what became the Beat movement. Sal can listen for hours as Dean and Carlo talk about philosophy and their adventures across the country. This lights a fire in Sal, and he decides to join Dean on his next cross-continental journey. Sal is invited to San Francisco by a friend, Remi Boncourt (Henri Crun), who has promised to set Sal up with housing and a job. Sal uses the prospect of the job as an excuse to borrow money from his aunt and go on the road trip. It is already clear to the reader that he is leaving more for the

⁴⁰ Tim Hunt. *Kerouac's crooked road: Development of a fiction*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996), xxxvi-xxxvii

⁴¹ Regina Weinreich, *The spontaneous poetics of Jack Kerouac* p.40

⁴² Matt Theado. *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 53

⁴³ Regina Weinreich. *The spontaneous poetics of Jack Kerouac, a study of the fiction* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 37

adventure than the actual job, and Sal himself admits that on the way there will be “girls, visions and everything”. (14) From his departure in 1947 and through the next few years he spends most of his time on the road, either with his new gang of hipsters from the Beat generation or with various bums, musicians, alcoholics, drug addicts and assorted other shady figures. He spends some time in both Denver and San Francisco doing odd jobs, dating various girls and sleeping on the couch at friends’ houses. He spends the winters back in New York writing and seemingly in limbo awaiting the next journey, except for a few holiday weeks, which he spends drinking with visiting friends, Columbia University students and Carlo Marx. From the first chapters of the book, my impression is that Sal and his crew of young men are reckless, carefree people who do not feel as if they fit in. They seem to be chasing every next high on the road, because they cannot seem to relax or settle down anywhere. This lifestyle is continued even though several of the participants are married or have children. They do not feel that the white middle-class world has anything to offer them anymore, and struggle to find their place amidst expectations of careers, materialism and conformity. This motivates the search for counter-cultural aspects of life on the road, in African American culture and music. They are not alone, and the search evolves into a whole society of writers, musicians and poets who work in opposition to mainstream society to counter the values they believe limit the quality of their lives, hide the truth, or simply get in the way of getting their “kicks.”

Dean is in many ways Sal’s mentor and inspiration, but he is also portrayed as a reckless child ruined by jails, juvenile detention centers and living his life on the road. Dean marries two women, dates many more, has children across the country and continually escapes from one woman to another, bringing Sal and the rest of the gang along on many of his journeys. Through the first part of the book, you get the sense that these young men are all quite sharp, but unsure of what to focus their talent on. This leads to searches of easily accessible and carefree highs, such as alcohol, marijuana, casual sex and traveling. Their idols are light-years away from the middle-class white America most of them seem to come from. That world seems settled, boring and outdated. “Wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me.” (169) Sal is fascinated by the “mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time,” these are his friends and people Dean has met through his years on the road, such as up-and-coming African American Jazz artists and the liberal people in San Francisco who seem to have a lot going for them when it comes to new forms of writing and lifestyles.

When Sal and Dean embark on their road trips, their main motivation seems to be to seek the new and unknown combined with fun, companionship and mingling with people who can offer deeper insight into the cultures they are exploring. However, Kerouac's documentation of it all brought increased focus on himself and his circle that became known as the founders of the Beat Generation. They were the most widely known and most radical counter-cultural reaction to 1950's mainstream America. The Beats were first and foremost young white middle-class college youth who were writers and adventurers, and also included their followers. They distanced themselves from the rising materialistic society through critical writing while seeking their own truths, answers and guidance to realize an alternative and more meaningful lifestyle. In doing so they broke American laws and America's norms by exploring phenomena such as narcotics, casual sex, African-American music and Eastern religion. Kerouac knew many of the founders of the writing style and attitude that became known as Beat. *On the Road*, in a semi-autobiographical way, depicted these people and provided insight for the reader into what must have seemed a pretty intense and appealing life-style to people sharing Sal's attitudes of searching for an escape from the establishment. This caused Kerouac to be dubbed "King of the Beats" by the press, a nickname he became quite displeased with as his celebrity status grew while he also had political views that certainly collided with some aspects considered part of the Beat culture.⁴⁴

When Kerouac wrote *On the Road*, he could obviously not foresee the legendary status that he and his friends would acquire as champions of the counter-culture. Even though Sal defies classical conservative American moral codes when it comes to both his sexual life, experimenting with illegal substances and his distaste for capitalism, college students and conventional families, he is still influenced by some traditional old American notions in his travels. Such an observation is based on his desire to go as far west as possible, and the fascination with the railroad, Native Americans, the endless open road and the independent free spirit. Especially the open road and the railroad seem to symbolize a freedom he did not feel he had back East that could cure his restlessness.⁴⁵ According to Ronald Primeau, "every highway hero wants to get away from the distractions of everyday life and drive into a time and place where the inner self can

⁴⁴ http://articles.cnn.com/2000-01-18/entertainment/kerouac_1_beat-generation-sexual-activity-allen-ginsberg?_s=PM:books

⁴⁵ Lars Erik Larson, "Free Ways and Straight Roads: The interstates of Sal Paradise and 1950's America", In *What's your road, man?: Critical essays on Jack Kerouac's On the Road*, Edited by, Hilary Holladay. Robert Holton, (USA, Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 35

emerge.”⁴⁶ This is exactly what Sal expects and feels he gets from being on the road, besides getting his “kicks,” which is always on the agenda. The Americans’ attraction to this idea of restlessness is said to have been created by Walt Whitman, a controversial 19th-century author who was a wanderer, a free spirit, who liked to describe sexuality, democracy and the open spaces of America, and is considered to be one of the most American of writers who are credited with inspiring the Beats.⁴⁷ The open road is also possible to connect with Sal’s fascination with frontier notions,⁴⁸ such as connecting with the pioneers both geographically and in mindset as he crosses the USA to reach as far west as one can get. He is also fascinated by ideas of the free spirit of Native American culture, and this he can also relate to as they drive on their own through prairies and small native communities in Mexico.

According to an essay by Lars Erik Larson, the postwar political climate in the USA was one of containment, according to most scholars. With the fear of communism and invasion, many viewed the open highway system as a liability and also a place where outcasts might roam. However, as Larson also points out, the culture of the fifties was quite diverse, and for migratory workers, aspiring artists and young people in general, the vast open landscape along the road offered excitement and “new Frontiers.”⁴⁹ For Sal the highway can offer a chance to experience and witness everything he is interested in, while letting him escape the conformity of his old life, which revolved around college and his aunt’s house. As mentioned earlier, Sal’s traveling is in many ways a counter-cultural protest against mainstream American society. In contrast to Holden Caulfield in the previous chapter, Sal does not attempt to do this alone, but by joining people with common values who want to create their own society. In this they are only partly successful, as I see it. They criticize capitalism and therefore adopt a lifestyle that can be sustained by a meager income, allowing them to avoid steady jobs and making major contributions to mainstream society. However, their lifestyle could not be sustained without the existence of mainstream America. Sal and his friends rely on others while hitchhiking or jumping boxcars. They also rely on the generosity of others to buy bus tickets and get them something to eat, drink and somewhere to sleep, relying on the comforts of modern

⁴⁶ Ronald Primeau, *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway*, (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), 69

⁴⁷ Ibid, 69,

http://www.nypost.com/p/news/local/brooklyn/walt_whitman_was_beat_man_Jg9fwBtid51FFwHf4P9nfP

⁴⁸ Ronald Primeau, *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway*, 4

⁴⁹ Lars Erik Larson, “Free Ways and Straight Roads: The interstates of Sal Paradise and 1950’s America”, In *What’s your road, man?: Critical essays on Jack Kerouac’s On the Road*, Edited by, Hilary Holladay. Robert Holton, 38

American homes. When Sal has spent the money he has borrowed from his aunt and nobody is willing to help him and his friends, they resort to stealing food and cigarettes. (149) It seems that to be able to continue their lifestyle of withdrawal, they have to rely partly on the society their counter-cultural protest is targeted against. This in one way shows a kind of double standard, but at the same time, as Thoreau showed in *Walden*, one can take a stand without complete withdrawal, as he exemplifies how one can live a simple, but good life by combining the best alternatives that offer individual freedom.⁵⁰

Henry David Thoreau was a famous author and philosopher of the mid-19th century who pushed for maintaining the wilderness, weak government and the rejection of too many commodities. He sought a lifestyle where he could live his life in nature, but he wanted to combine this with certain aspects from civilization, so that he would not have to discard the best parts of each world. Thoreau's legacy is huge, as he has influenced everything from the National Parks System to the Civil Rights movement and the evolution of the Hippies.⁵¹ One of Thoreau's greatest joys was to hike and use the landscape for pleasure and insight and not just for practical reasons.⁵² Many have undoubtedly followed such a middle-way lifestyle of combining aspects from civilization and nature, but in terms of the attitudes and actions that the Beats adopted in *On the Road*, his teachings definitely stood out as particularly oppositional, offering an alternative lifestyle to postwar America's increasingly materialistic and paranoid mainstream middle-class. According to Gunter Beck, Thoreau's "Walden-experiment of practical Transcendentalist self-reliance received attention by the Beat Generation, who longed for independence and self-determination."⁵³ Thoreau might be more famous for advocating conservation and politics of civil disobedience that influenced the Civil Rights movement and modern ecological awareness, but to the Beats he represented an independent man who went against the grain and rejected the commodification of the new industrial society.

For Sal the first years of travelling across the USA seem to have few downsides, except for some hard overnight stays in filthy bus stations, harsh weather conditions and his failure to find true love. For the most part their travels are carefree. Sal and Dean display quite boyish attitudes. They are afraid of responsibility, and whenever they can, they escape it by travelling at high speed toward a new destination, often driving for 20

⁵⁰ E.B White. "A Slight Sound at Evening" In *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Walden: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Edited by Richard Ruland, (New jersey, Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1968), 28

⁵¹ <http://americanajournal.hu/vol4no2/beck>

⁵² <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nattrans/ntwilderness/essays/preserva.htm>

⁵³ <http://americanajournal.hu/vol4no2/beck>

hours straight while having intense conversations about Dean's childhood memories or other assorted topics as they pass through the landscape he has grown up in. It seems that their choice of long-distance solitary driving is an escape, since it appears to be the journey itself and not the destinations that are the real goal of their movements. In Larson's words, "Sal and Dean find that the unsupervised space of the road enables the freedom to revel not only in memories of childhood, but also in the behavior of childhood."⁵⁴

After a while, however, Sal starts noticing how he and some of his peers are growing apart. Some take their drug abuse to a point of no return, some choose to settle down as family men while Dean becomes a bit too crazy in periods. The life changes of many of Sal's friends are noted in the novel, but it is naturally the changes and insights that occur to him and Dean that are the ones given most space in the novel. For the reader it becomes clear early on that Dean is an inspiration to Sal. Not only is Dean the progenitor of the road trips and a man with contagious energy, he serves several other important roles to Sal as well. According to Warren French, Dean also functions as a substitute for Sal's dead brother.⁵⁵ This theory seems plausible, as their relationship is a very tight-knit one, which evolves during their trips. For this thesis however, there are other sides of Dean which are more important to understand. These sides are the more rebellious ones; combined with his curiosity and extreme focus on sex, this creates a mad-man who shows disregard for all laws and norms as long as he can achieve his goals. These goals are often spontaneous and various, but usually based on adventure, sexual escapades and up-tempo partying and traveling. These activities are important to Sal, not only as they constitute exciting writing material, but also because they drag Sal into a chaotic and exciting world, which offers opposites to his more conventional life with resigned friends in New York.

Matt Theado points out in his book *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, based on a number of quotes from *On the Road*, that Sal always follows people who seem the most interesting to him.⁵⁶ He refers to a number of situations where Sal is ready to follow Dean quite uncritically. One example might be when they have sexual encounters with young Mexican prostitutes. (270, 271) As I have noted earlier, Dean offered Sal the possibility of gaining experience on an adventure through areas and fields in which he had no first-hand knowledge, but Dean had plenty. What Theado adds to this is the fact that when he is not

⁵⁴ Lars Erik Larson, "Free Ways and Straight Roads: The interstates of Sal Paradise and 1950's America", In *What's your road, man?: Critical essays on Jack Kerouac's On the Road*, Edited by, Hilary Holladay, Robert Holton, 40

⁵⁵ Warren French. *Jack Kerouac*, (Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1986), 36

⁵⁶ Matt Theado. *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, 60-65

following Dean across the USA for kicks, Sal spends half his time back in New York writing his book. In other words, Sal picks the craziest alternative in the Beat milieu to follow, not only as a gateway to the beginnings of his counter-cultural lifestyle out west, but also to ensure more interesting writing material for his book.⁵⁷ Through all the intense experiences Sal has with Dean and the rest of his friends on the road, he begins to grow and mature. Sal finds out that even if he will always consider Dean his best friend, they do not necessarily want the same things in life or see eye to eye in all instances. This eventually becomes clear after Dean repeatedly escapes from one marriage to another, leaving a trail of chaos in his wake. Galatea Dunkel (wife of Sal's and Dean's friend Ed Dunkel) and the other women in the gang have had enough. All except Sal have a go at Dean over his irresponsible behavior. Sal does not comment on nor abandon Dean, they still remain close, but it becomes clearer to him that he does not seek the same destructive chaos as Dean does and that Dean has become "the idiot, the imbecile. That's what Dean was, the HOLY GOOF."⁵⁸

As a consequence of Sal's maturation, Dean's role has changed. He has gone from the one who offers an opportunity to travel, rebel, escape norms of society and live carefree as in their youth to becoming a man Sal needs to take some time away from to live in a more settled environment.⁵⁹ Sal himself states early in the book not only that "the pearl will be handed to him" during his travels with Dean, but that he will end "sad and tired."⁶⁰ Sal divides his years between the travelling chaos with Dean, and when he has had enough, he escapes back to the conformity of New York during the winters, and the book ends with Sal settling down in New York more permanently. While Dean goes on rampage after rampage, Sal tries to settle down and attempts to create something from the journeys he has been through. The above-mentioned examples do not only exemplify that Sal has enough insight early on to know that the road tripping cannot for him be a permanent condition, but his need to settle down, find love and have some stability leads to changes in Sal, where he ends up developing away from Dean. Sal realizes that what he wants to do on and off for "kicks" is Dean's whole life. Sal is two-sided, he loves the adventure, but he also seeks security, and in the end his six-month winter breaks from the road change into a more permanent break, with him settling down with a woman named Laura. This signals a

⁵⁷ Ibid, 61,63

⁵⁸ Warren French. *Jack Kerouac*, 36

⁵⁹ Matt Theado. *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, 61

⁶⁰ Ibid p. 61, 64

potential goodbye to his counter-cultural life at the end of the book, while Dean continues on the same path. (288)

What we can conclude from these observations is that Sal himself sought a life somewhat closer to the middle ground, while documenting the more radical aspects and persons in the Beat movement. If we take a quick look at Kerouac's own political opinions, we can also notice a kind of split personality. At the same time as Kerouac was a front man for the late 40's and 50's counter-culture movement, he was "a political conservative,"⁶¹ a duality that might also explain why Sal is an unstable person who attempts to juggle two worlds. Kerouac was class president in college, a successful football player and had traveled with the US Marines.⁶² This is not mentioned much in the book, but Kerouac's sympathies with conservative politics and his attachment to Catholicism even when studying Buddhism can perhaps be explained by his previously having lived a relatively standard middle-class life.

Not only are themes and characters in *On the Road* countercultural, the style of writing breaks with traditional norms for how to write novels. Just as Sal needs to escape the conformity of his aunt's home, college friends and New York City to feel free, I get the impression that Kerouac needed to break rules and barriers in terms of composition in order to tell his story in a genuine way. Profanity and slang words are frequently used, words that many other books were censored for in the 50's. Such an act of defiance is definitely countercultural, even if it is not unique. However, it is the style he developed and dubbed Spontaneous Prose that I think is most important to this thesis. Kerouac first wrote *On the Road* without breaks or interruptions, on a 200-page roll of Teletype paper. This was later edited, but not by following regular norms; it still has a raw feeling to it and the short sentences give me a feeling of accelerated tempo while reading. Regina Heinrich states that Kerouac attempted to redefine writing by creating a more musical style closer to the bop music of the time and prose poetry.⁶³ Kerouac observed himself that the invention of spontaneous prose made words more alive,⁶⁴ which fits the fact that these young men attempt to maximize their lives through adventure. It also seems evident that inventing his own style of writing is a choice made to distance himself from many of society's norms. It would be hard to portray his countercultural and chaotic adventures in a lively and exciting manner by sticking to the traditional rules of writing. Originally the story was written on a

⁶¹ <http://www.beatmuseum.org/kerouac/jackkerouac.html>

⁶² Matt Theado. *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, 63

⁶³ Regina Weinreich. *The spontaneous poetics of Jack Kerouac, a study of the fiction*, 40

⁶⁴ Robert A. Hipkiss. *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism*, 80

long scroll of paper with hardly any punctuation at all to signify that they were constantly on the move. While there is less punctuation and a different use of it in *On the Road* compared to most books, it was extensively revised and besides adding punctuation, the editors insisted on fictive names and a less provocative style. That Kerouac attempted to use real names, strengthens the claim that it was largely an autobiographical novel about him and the Beats' counter-cultural lifestyle.⁶⁵

Jazz plays an important role in *On the Road*, not only because of its influence on spontaneous prose. The Jazz style named bop was usually performed by African-American musicians in exciting locations usually off limits (if not physically) to the white-middle class, which gives two reasons for its appeal to Sal and Dean on their counter-cultural quest. First of all they were sick of middle-class conformity, and as jazz usually was performed on the other side of the tracks, it had an element of risk and excitement to it to Sal and his friends who were always seeking the company and culture of minorities and outcasts to extend their range of experience. Besides its inspiration on the spontaneous prose itself, jazz was performed in jam sessions, making it seem very spontaneous, never-ending and lively, breaking with norms of regular musical composition, which in many ways can be paralleled to how Sal and Dean relate to society in general.⁶⁶ Sal observes the musician Slim Gaillard: "He does and says anything that comes into his head. He'll sing Cement Mixer, Put-ti Put-ti' and suddenly slow down the beat and brood over his bongos with fingertips barely tapping the skin as everybody leans forward breathlessly to hear; you think he'll do this for a minute or so, but he goes right on, for as long as an hour." (166)

Theado observes that Kerouac in his book portrays IT, a notion Dean is always searching for, a concept, which cannot completely be defined, but "it is reaching a metaphorical dominion where time stops and everyday concerns fall away."⁶⁷ "Dean explains what he means by IT through jazz."⁶⁸ Jazz becomes the counter-cultural music that is the soundtrack of their counter-cultural behavior. Every city in the U.S. that appeals to Sal and Dean, such as Chicago, New Orleans and San Francisco has Jazz scenes where African-American musicians and white-middle-class hipsters meet. Sal and Dean consequently seek out these places, as this is where they can get their "kicks", "dig" the music and communicate with people they are either intrigued by or believe share their set of values. To Sal and Dean and the Beat movement described in *On the Road*, jazz seems

⁶⁵ http://us.penguingroup.com/static/rguides/us/on_the_road_original_scroll.html

⁶⁶ Peter Townsend, *Jazz in American Culture*, (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 4

⁶⁷ Matt Theado. *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, 70

⁶⁸ Ibid, 71

to be their music in the same ways as folk and blues were for the hippies, grunge for the Generation X'ers and rap for African-American youth and hip hoppers of the 1980's.

Both Sal 's and Dean's sexual practices send a very counter-cultural message, not only to the mainstream society, but more specifically to its Christian cohort. Dean wants to fornicate with women all across the grid, from age thirteen to older grandmothers. He has threesomes, dates new women while his wife is pregnant with his child, and offers Sal a go with one of his girlfriends. (46) In other words, Dean does not only lack empathy for the women he encounters, he is also one of the inspirations for a movement that would become a lot larger in the 60's, the free love and sharing of sexual partners that the Hippies found natural. Sal is not as reckless in his sexual encounters, early in the book he even shows tendencies toward a more traditional conservative view on sexual partners by stating that "people should at least have proper talks before having sex together, not courting talk, real straight talk about souls, for life is holy and every moment is precious." (56) Sal is in search of his true love on his trips, but while he is awaiting her appearance, he makes love to Dean's girl, Marylou (119) and has several sexual partners such as white college girls in Denver, young Mexican prostitutes and an older wealthy woman. Sal has already been divorced once before embarking on his road trips. He shows his disregard for conventional American values in his attitude toward sex and women, both by entering sexual relationships without any intention of marriage, at the same time as he disrespects the values of monogamy.

However, what I find more important than the number of sexual partners, when documenting the Beats' counter-cultural attitudes, is their acceptance of and interest in other races than their own Caucasian group. Their travels took place in the late 40's and early 50's, when the USA was still a largely segregated society. In many geographical locations, especially Southern, mixed couples could face danger from the Ku Klux Klan and other racists. Not only do Dean and Sal have sexual intercourse with Mexican prostitutes while in Mexico, they chase African-American women and Sal has a relationship with a young single Mexican mother in California. Sal even moves with her back to her family in Bakersfield and gets a job in the cotton fields. As a white male who had been to college, by working in the cotton fields with Mexican families Sal shows his distance from mainstream white American society, while embracing the simplicity of the rural Mexicans. Sal eventually gives up both the girl and the cotton picking, admitting that he is not made for such work. In the big picture of the book, this does not matter much, the point is that he goes against the grain in three different ways in this situation. Firstly he

dates a Mexican girl, secondly she is a single mother, and thirdly he rejects white American culture by taking an immigrant job with far lower pay than he could have achieved elsewhere.

Sal does not change his attitude, even if the relationship does not work out. In a later road trip to Mexico, he repeatedly credits the purity of the Native Americans of Mexico who he calls the Fellahin Indians. (264) Instead of viewing their poverty-stricken lifestyle as a consequence of a long and sad chapter in North American history filled with genocide, war and disease, he sees these remnant native societies as a purer and happier alternative to American society.

One specific area where Sal and some of his peers display their distaste toward the establishment is when they are working in fields operated by “the man” or capitalism. The main characters only work for short periods in *On the Road* and work is not a major theme; avoiding working actually seems more important. However, I still think it is worth focusing on as the work situations so clearly exemplify their countercultural attitudes.

Sal’s initial plan is to meet up with Remi Boncoeur in San Francisco to get a job. Remi manages to get Sal hired with him as a special guard at a barracks for sailors waiting to get deployed. Neither Sal nor Remi have much regard for the job or their work peers. Before even starting his job, Sal says “and to my surprise the bastards hired me,” (62) already stating that he has a negative attitude toward the job and the people in this profession, and that he is surprised that they would want one of “his kind” to do the job. Sal has only been an employee for two weeks when he continues his harsh criticism of the other guards and authorities: “It was a horrible crew of men, men with cop-souls, all except Remi and myself.” (63) Sal observes that he is skeptical of what his friends will think of his work choice (62), and he also clearly sides with the sailors he is supposed to guard. (63) Sal describes the sailors as hard men who drank and who were all most likely escaping from “something – usually the law.” (63) For the most part the job is uneventful, and when trouble first erupts at the barracks, Sal is drinking with the sailors. (63) This exemplifies not only his distaste for the authorities, but also how he sympathizes and feels as an insider with what the establishment would define as outsider groups.

Boncoeur has his way of showing disregard for the establishment as well. He starts the practice of stealing of groceries from work. (68) At first Sal is not comfortable with this; however, he gets used to it and continues using it as a solution to get by on other occasions in the book. Boncoeur displays both a countercultural attitude and behaves like a Good Samaritan as he with a “real Robin Hood attitude,” donates much of the groceries to

a widow and her poverty-stricken children. (72) When he was younger, Bonceour had been expelled from various schools and felt neglected by his parents, and according to Sal his stealing is a way of getting back at the system, as if he feels entitled to a larger share than mainstream society has granted him. (68) Bonceour admits that in his worldview it is him and his friends against the cops, bosses, the establishment and women who attempt to prey on them. (69) When it comes to the job at the market in Denver, Sal does not show his critical side the way he does toward the barrack guards. However, he shows his irresponsibility by not showing up on his first day at work without even giving notice. (47) My impression is not that Sal and his friends are necessarily lazy. But they attempt to stay clear of conventional society in every way, and this includes avoiding work where they are controlled and confined by certain hours and people who represent what they are rebelling against. As proof one can both refer to examples from the book, and look at some of the characters' achievements in real life. In the book Sal spends months dedicated to his work as a writer, and he also explains how dedicated Old Bull Lee is. (14, 136) If one takes a look at the published works of Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs or Jack Kerouac, one can see that they all produced a great deal of work through their lifetime, but the work is intended for themselves and their companions, in defiance of established society.⁶⁹ In other words, neither Carlo, Old Bull nor Sal lacked a work ethic, but it is only displayed when it serves the counter-cultural purpose of experience and knowledge-seeking or producing literary works attacking or creating alternatives to mainstream society. Working in this society is so frowned upon that Sal is embarrassed as a barracks cop, immediately gives up his job in Denver, and resorts to stealing on the road. Only when it comes to the survival of his Mexican girlfriend and her child combined with an opportunity to show that he has no racially defined boundaries, does serving "the man" become a cause worthy of his own participation.

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed and analyzed Sal and Dean's countercultural goals and activities. Their adventures usually include gatherings of other people as well. But since many of these adventures represent individual and personal exploits, one cannot assume that Sal or Dean's countercultural profile is necessarily also representative of the other Beats involved in *On the Road*. Since this novel was interpreted as being a book displaying the new counter-culture as lived out by the most famous people in the Beat

⁶⁹ <http://www.poemhunter.com/allen-ginsberg/poems/> <http://www.biblio.com/jack-kerouac~103337~author>

movement, I think it is important that I briefly discuss some of the other characters in relation to the counter-cultural themes of the book.

Sal's friend Carlo Marx is in reality Allen Ginsberg, and he is possibly the most famous person portrayed in the book. According to Lars Movin, the author of *Beat: På sporet af den amerikanske Beat Generation*, Allen Ginsberg was "his generation's promoter and prophet who gave a voice to the bohemian counter-culture against materialism, conformity and the American Dream."⁷⁰ Movin describes Ginsberg as a figure that transcended the Beat generation as a figure who was "larger than life".⁷¹ Allen Ginsberg is most famous for his work *Howl and Other Poems*, which is said to be the beginning of the sexual revolution. Both the title and his poetic themes, including drugs and homosexuality, were denounced and the book taken to court, which led to Allen Ginsberg becoming a champion of free speech and this was the beginning of his life as a famous political activist.⁷² When the events in *On the Road* occurred, Ginsberg had not yet published his most famous works or attained his celebrity status. However, when Sal notices the energy of Carlo's and Dean's discussion, he senses that there is something great latent in Carlo. (11) It does not take long for the reader to understand that Carlo is a man placed on the counter-cultural side of society. On the same page as Sal describes why Carlo and Dean appeal to him, saying that "the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time," Carlo tells Dean about his friends "who grow weed in Texas, sit locked up in Rikers Island or who wander round Times Square hallucinating from Benzedrine." (11)

Though we are not yet aware of Carlo's attitudes to the life situations of his above-mentioned friends, it is already quite clear that his beliefs are both ideologically and morally far from those of the establishment. In reality, Ginsberg and Cassady had a homosexual relationship as well.⁷³ This would be considered very counter-cultural and immoral at the time, considering that even the poem *Howl* with its homosexual references was taken to court. The gay relationship is not depicted in *On the Road*, meaning that Kerouac has excluded some counter-cultural sexual activity from the reader, which suggests that at least some members of Kerouac's Beat crowd were even further removed

⁷⁰ Lars Movin, *Beat: - på sporet af den amerikanske beatgeneration*, (København, Informations Forlag, 2008), 557

⁷¹ *ibid*, p.557

⁷² http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/g/allen_ginsberg/index.html
http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/allen_ginsberg/poems/8315

⁷³ Lars Movin, *Beat: - på sporet af den amerikanske beatgeneration*, 70

from the morality of middle-class society than the book makes explicit. *On the Road* does not openly inform the reader about this gay relationship, but there are hints one can interpret as revealing; such as “I didn’t see them for about two weeks during which time they cemented their relationship to fiendish allday-allnight-talk proportions,” (12) and before parting ways, Dean and Carlo take profile pictures that “Carlo and Dean neatly cut down the middle with a razor and saved one half each in their wallets.” (12) The intensity and emotional involvement of their relationship sounds more to me like a couple that just started dating than a pair of newfound friends. When Sal meets Dean, he views him and Carlo as counterparts in a counter-cultural world, where he makes it clear that the inspirational hero he needs to follow for kicks and answers is the energetic Dean. Carlo has, according to Sal, given up on the world: “All my other current friends were intellectuals, Carlo Marx and his nutty surrealist low-voiced serious staring talk.” (13) And after describing Dean as “the west wind, an ode from the plains, something new, long prophesied,” he continues describing his current friends, including Carlo, as “in a negative nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons.” (13)

The above-mentioned quotes represent Sal’s first description of Carlo, but after the travelling begins, my impression is that Sal and Carlo seem more alike than in the beginning. When Sal arrives in Denver, he does not only meet Dean, he meets a whole crowd of old friends who are in Denver to explore everything from Native American culture and the Rockies to the Mexican quarters. Instead of having traveling with Dean as his main goal, Carlo seems to get his kicks from the deep all-night talks combined with drugs in search of truth and new perspectives. (43) Carlo documents everything from his talks with Dean, which shows that both Carlo and Sal in many ways have the same motivation, namely to use Dean and his counter-cultural thoughts and behavior to not only get their kicks, but to be able to create their own written products from their experience. (48) Carlo seemingly has the same lust for life as Sal and Dean, as he is depicted dancing happily down Denver streets as they are walking around Mexico town in Denver in search of adventure. (45)

However, one also gets the impression that both Carlo and Dean are a bit too crazy for the rest of Sal's gang. As previously mentioned, Dean has a falling-out with many of his friends for his crazy actions. Carlo is more of a person who seemingly keeps to himself, but he too has a falling out with their crew of friends in Denver. Sal describes what he sees when he arrives in Denver by stating that “Dean and Carlo were the Underground

monsters of Denver this season.” (40) “Chad King and Tim Grey and Roland Major together with the Rawlinses, generally agreeing to ignore Dean Moriarity and Carlo Marx. I was smack in the middle of this interesting war.” (39) Not everybody can get along, and groups of friends have disagreements, but in *On the Road* my impression is that Dean and Carlo are simply a bit too much for the rest of the Denver group, who seem more like regular young adults with somewhat creative occupations and an unconventional outlook on things. They are mostly occupied with chasing girls, partying and going on road trips, while Carlo and Dean seem to be searching for philosophical truths and a deeper meaning of life.

Carlo also joins Sal and Dean on a trip to Old Bull Lee in New Orleans, but he is not referred to very much, as if he does not really participate in all the action. However, short references to him such as “Carlo was trying to write poetry on heroin” (150) give the impression that he is always pushing limits and up to something creative by himself. Throughout the rest of the book, Carlo takes part only while Sal is back in New York, where Sal spends time at Carlo’s apartment to party and listen to him talk. Carlo has seemingly become even crazier; according to Sal he has pretty much given up on sleeping (126) and frequently has hallucinations, such as when he believed that “he had walked down 125th Street under water with the fish.” (124) Since Sal takes time to stay with Carlo and document his conversations, it is clear that Sal finds him fascinating since he uses terms such as “his mad eyes glittered at us” to describe Carlo lecturing to the gang. (124) I believe Carlo sees the trips Dean and Sal embark on as futile when it comes to finding whatever they might be looking for. Carlo tells the group that “you’ll all go flying off to the West Coast and come staggering back in search of your stone.” (124) To me these sound like words of wisdom from someone who sees through the superficial nature of their constant travels. Carlo, however, had stayed in New York most of the time, going through various hallucinations and bad periods. (124) He is described as writing poetry on drugs, and these hallucinogenic states might be attempts to be creative in search of enlightenment. He seems to want to escape the same world as the others by using more extreme means.

Another person worth a closer look is Old Bull Lee, who in real life is another famous Beat named William Burroughs: an author, marijuana farmer and a junkie.⁷⁴ He published his first book in 1953 entitled *Junkie*,⁷⁵ and became famous in 1959 for his novel, *Naked Lunch*, where he depicted his drug fantasies. He also became famous for shooting his wife

⁷⁴ Lars Movin, *Beat: - på sporet af den amerikanske beatgeneration*, 108-110

⁷⁵ Ibid, 101

in Mexico City,⁷⁶ but in *On the Road* his role is playing the junkie mad-man that Sal and his friends can visit on his farm in New Orleans. Sal first describes him as “a man who earned little and spent all of it together with his wife on drugs, this caused him to have the lowest food bill as they never ate, nor did the children and they did not seem to care.”

(136) From this introduction, many would probably think negatively of Old Bull Lee as a junkie who neglects his children. Sal, however, seems full of praise rather than criticism. Like Dean and Carlo, Old Bull is a person Sal seems to look up to because of his radical choices and his distance from the values of mainstream America. Out of curiosity, Old Bull has traveled all over the world; most of this time he has spent with the outcasts of society, often ending up as their friend or working with them in their lower-class professions. (136) Sal puts it this way: “He studied everything for the experience and right now he was studying his drug habit.” (137) Sal views him as a teacher who seemingly has great influence on the other Beats, as “Jane sat at his feet; so did I; so did Dean; and so had Carlo. We’d all learned from him.” (138) I believe that Old Bull Lee is a significant influence on the others, not only because he seemingly has the most experience, but also he has put all the talk and ideas into practice. He had grown up as an upper-class Southerner and chosen to turn his life completely the other way,⁷⁷ according to Sal: “everything he liked in life, he liked because it was ugly.” (137) “His chief hate was Washington bureaucracy; second to that, liberals; then cops.”(137-138)

Old Bull Lee goes further in his counter-cultural activities and lifestyle than all the other, except perhaps Dean. The difference is that Dean is born on the road and continues to live this life as if it is the only one he knows, while Old Bull sought out this lifestyle to change his former life beyond recognition. He has taken steps to move somewhere with his whole family where he seemingly deliberately has created his own world, where he does carpentry, drugs and sits in the yard feeding his seven cats. (143) My impression is that Old Bull is quite content compared to his more hungry friends. Old Bull has found love (139) and a way to live his own life and experiment in peace. I believe the lack of love and experience in Sal's life are two important reasons he seeks him out.

Conspiracy theories are part of Old Bull's teachings, and they focus on consumerism and the American Government. He believes they stand behind a policy of creating faulty products with built-in obsolescence in order to force regular Americans into becoming workers, while the people on top can receive the profits. (142) Old Bull has not

⁷⁶ http://www.beat-art.no/no/william_burroughs.htm

⁷⁷ Ibid

only found love and experienced more through travel than the rest of the Beats, but my impression is that he is the only one who with eloquence and confidence seems to be able to criticize what he does not like about the establishment. A result of this is that nearly all his activities are counter-cultural, from drugs and alcohol to his withdrawal from ordinary society, and that he seems to be utterly content on the outside. It is thus natural that he tries to persuade Sal to stay with him in New Orleans instead of chasing Dean to the west coast, observing that "you will never make it if you travel with this madman." (140)

The last argument strengthening my belief that Old Bull Lee has come further than his friends in finding answers through counter-cultural activity, is his fascination with the year 1910, which he believes was a much better time in America to pursue his main interests. (137) We have previously seen a fascination for more traditional American notions in Sal, from the open road, Native Americans and the west, to the lifestyle and teachings of Walt Whitman, whose "invention" of the open road "had become a holy place in the modern quest to restore a lost harmony."⁷⁸ Old Bull Lee explains his wish to be alive in 1910 on the background that society was more open and free then, leaving more choices up to the individual, as opposed to postwar America with both increased government control and growing materialism. (137-139) According to Primeau, this is a common trait mentioned in road stories, expressing a desire "to recover the old ways or to clean the lenses of perception to see again what is still there."⁷⁹

When it comes to the rest of the friends Sal socializes with across America, I do not believe that any of them independently have any important influence on him or the book. Sal's influences are combinations of the travels, phenomena from various geographical locations, and the people he meets along the way. According to Sal's friend Roland Major, "the arty types are all over America, sucking up its blood," meaning one did not have to go out and search for the arts. (41) This solidifies the impression that there were creative and counter-cultural movements in the making across the USA. Still, Sal and his friends focus on a few specific cities in search of this "new vibe". San Francisco attracts them with its hipster scene, in Chicago and New Orleans they explore African American music, in Denver the lifestyle of bums and cowboys, and in Mexico they meet a purer people not yet corrupted by capitalism and materialism.

Sal, Dean and many of their friends soak up all the counter-cultural activities which go on in a certain place, and when they feel they have exhausted these possibilities, they move

⁷⁸ Primeau Ronald, *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway*, 38

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 51

on to the next destination in search of new experiences, new people or just a change of scene. San Francisco (SF) has a special appeal to Sal in many ways, not only the symbolic value of being as far west as you can get in the USA. The counter-culture has a strong standing in San Francisco, and Sal has not even spent five minutes there before he is sure that he is going to “dig” the hobos, the music and the ethnic neighborhoods. (58,164) The fact that Sal and Dean never hold a job for long and choose to seek out the poorer areas of each city for their special appeal, might be why they so often have to move on. However, it is in ethnically segregated or demographically young neighborhoods that most of the counter-cultural activity takes place and where they can find inspiration and peers. A huge inspiration for Sal is jazz (especially bebop), its tempo and style are even said to have influenced Kerouac’s style of writing, his spontaneous prose.⁸⁰ In San Francisco, when both he and Dean are about to lose faith in their whole SF project, the jazz show of Slim Gaillard gives them their kicks back. (166) Not only is the show creative and unconventional, being full of freestyles and jamming, but the crowd is “full of eager young semi intellectuals” like themselves; to Dean this is a meeting with God. (166)

Sal seems extremely fascinated by the unconventional manner and spontaneity in which the whole jazz scene functions in SF. He spends nights walking around observing and collecting inspiration from the maddest jazz musicians and personalities he meets. “I never saw such crazy musicians. Everybody in Frisco blew. It was the end of the continent; they didn’t give a dam.”(168) Sal is extremely fascinated by all this energy and creativity, yet he admits that he does not know what he has gotten out of his visit to SF and admits that the whole scene and living situation is a bit too much for him. This results in his escaping back to New York, but in the spring he repeats his travel pattern and goes back on the road to continue his search for answers. (168-169) Sal travels back to Denver in search of more adventures, but none of his Denver gang are around. Walking through Mexican and African American neighborhoods, he feels lonely, but picks up the vibe of how lively and hospitable these neighborhoods seem. Sal states that the African-American lifestyle has a lot of appeal to him. He claims that he is “disillusioned, because all his life he has only had white ambition.” (169, 170) So did his father and brother, and they both seem to have failed within such narrow limits. He continues by saying: “Wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night.” (169)

⁸⁰ Lars Movin, *Beat: - på sporet af den amerikanske beatgeneration*, 51

When using demographics to measure life quality based on income, housing, education levels and health, Caucasian whites not surprisingly, score higher than African Americans, but to Sal and his friends this has no appeal, they are against conformism and would rather live fast and die young. Postwar white America represented conformity, monoculture and censorship to Sal and the Beats. The appeal of African-American values and the rejection of white middle-class ideals by “hipsters” and counter-cultural youth are best explained in Norman Mailer’s article “The White Negro.” I think we can establish that Sal and Dean behave like existentialists, as they attempt to maximize the amount of action and experience in their lives. According to Mailer: “To be an existentialist, one must be able to feel oneself—one must know one’s desires, one’s rages, one’s anguish, one must be aware of the character of one’s frustration and know what would satisfy it.”⁸¹ To Mailer the perfect example of an existentialist was the African American because, “Any Negro who wishes to live must live with danger from his first day, and no experience can ever be casual to him, no Negro can saunter down a street with any real certainty that violence will not visit him on his walk. The cameos of security for the average white: mother and the home, job and the family, are not even a mockery to millions of Negroes; they are impossible.”⁸² “The Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks.” Mailer describes why African Americans felt a necessity and a drive to live in the moment, and from this they developed their own culture on the sidelines of society. Sal and his friends escaping from society and seeking more than economic security and a life filled with routine, now felt the appeal of mimicking and joining the African-American lifestyle of Jazz artists, as it offered them the opposite of what they came from. What Sal wanted, according to Mailer, was “to explore that domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness.”⁸³ Mailer goes on to elaborate on an issue mentioned by me earlier of why Sal and the Beats saw a need to break with mainstream society: “the American existentialist—the hipster, the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war, relatively quick death by the State as *l’univers concentrationnaire*, or with a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled (at what damage to the mind and the heart and the liver and the nerves no research foundation for cancer will discover

⁸¹ <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online.php?id=26>

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

in a hurry) , if the fate of twentieth century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self.”⁸⁴

This quote sums up most of the motivation behind *On the Road*, except perhaps Sal’s search for love. Sal and his friends demonstrate through their discussions in the book why they live on the fringes of society, and what aspects of African-American culture appeal to them. When Sal walks alone in Denver that night, however, he feels that no matter how hard he tries to maintain his speed on the road, he will never become completely free. “To do so he would have to become like a Mexican or African American.” According to earlier American norms, white civilization was superior to that of other races. As mentioned earlier, mingling between the races was frowned upon, so stating in a widely published book that white American society has done more damage than good to Sal, and that he would rather live as a person from a race with a darker skin complexion, is a highly controversial statement and an attack on the establishment. Throughout Sal and Dean’s counter-cultural travels, many of their activities have revolved around following African American music, seeking out bars and streets frequented by African Americans and Mexicans, and dating women of a different skin color. Some of these aspects of their counter-cultural activity may be deliberate choices and some can possibly be coincidences occurring on the road. Theado points out that Sal’s fascination and “empathy for the African American is a bit naïve.”⁸⁵ This I can agree with, as he seems to glorify their lifestyle or fail to notice or acknowledge many of the hardships they as a race have gone through. Sal seeks their lifestyle out of curiosity, while they have created it mainly because of necessity. Nonetheless, Sal is so intrigued by the kind of “living” the races on the fringes of the controlling 50’s society are engaged in, that he wishes to be one of them. “When realizing he cannot become African American, Mexican or Japanese” (169), he says, “Down in Denver, down in Denver All I did was die.” (170) He leaves their neighborhoods and seeks out what I take to be a rich white girl. He spends the night with her before she hands him a 100\$ bill to travel once again to San Francisco. (171) This is the perfect example of Sal’s struggle to make a choice and how he balances between the conformity of the establishment against being on a counter-cultural journey where the goal is to experience everything the “other side” has to offer.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Matt Theado, *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, 67

Their quest has a religious aspect to it as well. Kerouac himself was raised a Catholic and would later in life somewhat re-attach himself to Catholicism, but after he wrote *On the Road*, he wrote *The Dharma Bums*, a book where travel once again is the theme, but this time not combined with kicks, but enlightenment through Buddhism. As Sal in *On the Road* struggles to juggle his loyalties toward the counter-cultural world with the world of white-middle class and family, Kerouac also combines Catholicism with Buddhism in what seems to be an internal conflict.⁸⁶ He will refer both to Christianity and biblical aspects when he has his epiphanies, as well as seeking enlightenment through Buddhist principles. In *On the Road* too, the reader is shown that their journeys may also have a religious dimension. Theado believes that both the term Beat and the point in *On the Road* where everybody but Sal criticizes Dean can be connected to “Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew, chapter 5, that begins, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” where Sal understands what insight Dean has found by hitting rock bottom as Jesus understands and acknowledges the poor.⁸⁷

As already mentioned Sal and Dean are in search of IT, which is described by Theado in the following way: “a state of being that cannot be defined concretely, but there are frantic methods that seem helpful in reaching the metaphorical dominion where time stops and everyday concerns fall away.”⁸⁸ This can be compared to the state one searches for as a Zen Buddhist. Zen Buddhists usually use meditation to reach enlightenment, but the focus of Zen when it comes to experience and knowledge is similar: “A process of discovering wisdom culminates in the experiential dimension in which the equality of thing-events is apprehended in discerning them. The most distinguishing feature of this school of the Buddha-Way is seen in its contention that wisdom, accompanied by compassion, is expressed in the everyday “life-world” when associating with one's self, people, and nature.”⁸⁹ Alan Watts describes “the goal of Zen practice to be “a total clarity and presence of mind.”⁹⁰ Especially Dean seems to have insight when it comes to infusing these brief moments on the road with larger significance, at concerts or through conversations that give this enlightened clarity, but this is also the focus of Carlo and Sal as they search for a deeper meaning. The details and range of their religious epiphanies are not very important to my thesis, as counter-culture is the focal point. More important is the

⁸⁶ <http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/Miscellaneous/KerouacBuddhism.html>

⁸⁷ Matt Theado, *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, 69

⁸⁸ Ibid, 69, 70

⁸⁹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/japanese-zen/>

⁹⁰ Matt Theado, *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, 70, 71

choice of religion, and for Sal we see a shift from a more traditional Western religion to Buddhism; an Eastern religion practiced in Asia and by some of the Chinese and Japanese in the USA.

The book ends with Sal in a steady relationship in New York. They plan to move to SF, but instead they settle down and Sal works on publishing his books. The ending is the proof that no matter how much fun his trips have been and no matter how much he has learned, experienced and liked aspects of the counter-culture, he did not find any answers reassuring enough to make him want to abandon the more stable white-middle-class life which he never completely managed to shake off in the first place. Just like Holden Caulfield, he has realized that any final answers are impossible to find and instead, in many ways, he ends up where he started.

Chapter Three: *The Catcher in the Rye* and *On the Road*: A comparison

Salinger and Kerouac both deliver a counter-cultural message in opposition to the culture of the fifties, and both books revolve partly around New York City. Still, their messages are often strikingly different. Whereas Salinger's Holden Caulfield chooses withdrawal from society, Kerouac in a sense created his own culture and society, with their own rules and norms, instead of those of mainstream America.⁹¹

There are also similarities between these two books. The time period they were written in, the public reaction to language and explicit sexual references, as well as the questing nature of the main characters. When the books were written, both characters find themselves in and around the urban environment of New York City. The 1950's has not only been described as cold because of the political landscape and the "either you are with us or against us" attitude.⁹² Postmodern society in the city was one of alienation of the individual. This is caused both by the destabilization created by the increased speed of information through television and by the big corporations targeting everyone as a potential consumer through massive advertisement campaigns. "This overwhelming mass of information combined with the apparent freedom of consumer society makes it hard for the individual to find a core of meaning in his or her existence."⁹³ According to Richard Lehan, "we are left with a sense of diminished humanity, of the anonymous and superfluous, of human isolation and fragility, of anxiety and great nervous tension."⁹⁴ Both Holden and Sal's counter-cultural behavior occurs when they find themselves stuck amidst this chaos and decide that they want out and to register their opposition to the damage postwar America has inflicted on them and to a certain degree, on the whole society.

Holden is a bit younger than Sal, so he has not directly participated in WWII; however, they both represent a group of young men who are unsure of where to place themselves in postwar America. Both books include aspects of a masculine crisis and a masculine rebellion. Firstly, both authors and main characters are men. *On the Road* is semi-autobiographical, and *The Catcher in the Rye* includes aspects clearly influenced by J.D. Salinger's childhood. Naturally, the characters' conflict with society is seen from a

⁹¹ Matt Theado. *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, 53

⁹² Warren French. *The Fifties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama*, (Florida, Everett/Edwards, inc, 1970), 2

⁹³ Øystein Andersen. *Postmoderne overbelastning: En komperativ analyse av tre storbyromaner*, Masteroppgave i almenn litteraturvitenskap, 6

⁹⁴ Richard Lehan. *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History*, (Los Angeles, The University of California Press, 1998), 266

male point of view. I have no doubt that females can feel equally alienated, disgusted and lost in postwar American capitalistic society, but part of the focus in both books seems to be to reinstall traditional masculine values. Neither Holden nor Sal wish to partake in white middle-class society. Sal has tried his luck as an athlete, but rather wants adventure, and during his adventures he concludes that values and virtues of the frontier and the Native Americans lifestyle would be a better alternative to secure a good quality of life and appreciation for what one has. Holden sometimes seems to want to live a solitary life in the forest instead of dealing with the hypocrisies of prep school life, which is soon to be capitalist life as he becomes an adult. The masculine appeal to Holden of living by himself in the woods and doing odd jobs, seems to be every man for himself. This would mean a lifestyle where no one would try to corrupt him or impress him, and where he would not have to do anything on false premises. In other words, a society appreciating old masculine values appeals to Sal, while “being a man” and making a living for himself is what appeals to Holden when it comes to reinstating masculinity. What they have in common is that they both seem to know more of and idealize an outdated male role which they cannot seem to fit into or combine with postwar America.

They both show distaste for the rising focus on consumerism, which is targeted towards teenagers and young adults. However, this increased focus on consumerism was based on middle-class America receiving higher wages, and the emphasis on educating the young generation created more leisure time, which is part of the background for both Sal and Holden’s opportunities to engage in counter-cultural activities.

They both want to lead a life where they can be isolated from social realities such as authority, capitalism, consumerism and white middle-class American norms. When it comes to their view on authorities, Sal and Holden respond pretty similarly. They both show no regard for the authorities’ laws and opinions, as they both do not believe authorities such as Headmasters or police have the right to determine how they should live their lives or what they are entitled to. Their counter-cultural response, however, is not similar, but from their response they both attempt to create a template for a better world to live in. Holden directly criticizes other characters in *The Catcher in the Rye* for their “phoniness,” as well as constantly informing the reader of why he does not like certain people and institutions. While Holden reflects and criticizes the world he is surrounded by, Sal leaves this unsatisfactory world to seek experiences and opportunities elsewhere by repeatedly going on road trips. While Holden deals with the issue of loneliness, Sal creates his own society with similar-minded people. They both seek and admire old American

values and wish to live in a state reflected in the teachings of Thoreau, without directly referring to him. Holden wishes to retreat into the woods, while Sal idealizes a spartan lifestyle on the fringes of American society where he has to partake as little as possible in capitalism and white middle-class activities. Holden never gets to the point where he embarks on his journey, while Sal has a number of exciting adventures. Even though Holden never leaves New York and Sal does, I am under the impression that both books depict a form of escape from the same ideals and norms of postwar white middle-class America.

Sal searches for kicks, a deeper meaning in life, and joins the “mad ones” on the road as an escape from capitalism, consumerism, conformity, boredom and a sense of alienation in the midst of educational institutions and urban life, which do not seem to offer him anything of joy or growth. Holden tries to escape the “phonies” by deliberately getting kicked out from prep schools, which he sees as a place where young men get indoctrinated to become “actors” in a capitalistic world where everybody attempts to please each other on false premises of being successful. Holden is also escaping the “phonies” by seeking out other people he believes share his views or have managed to avoid selling out to the phony society, in the hope that they can offer some reassurance that he can make it as an adult without becoming a phony himself. When this does not seem to work, as everyone he had faith in seems to have sold out somehow, he attempts to escape backward in time to an untouched childhood, by spending time with his 10-year-old sister and wanting to protect her from the corrupting norms of the adult world.

Holden is more verbal in his counter-cultural activity. He openly criticizes people and institutions and is very direct when airing his opinions and he is seemingly more frustrated and angry. Sal is seldom so direct, though he occasionally criticizes white-middle-class society and capitalist America for not offering him enough kicks, for not being open-minded or having snobbish attitudes towards his lifestyle, “while having roast beef with their families on Sundays.” (85) My opinion is that there is a bigger chance to achieve counter-cultural goals for Sal because he is older than Holden. His peers have matured and had time to experience the world, which increases Sal's chances to meet people sharing his attitudes, thus simplifying the goal of creating his own templates to live by. Holden is still in high school where the other teenagers are strongly influenced by the school system and their families.

Everything Holden does seems to be of an oppositional nature; because he always targets an “enemy” in his comments and actions. Sal, I would claim, is more counter-

cultural in his actions, but less analytical. His counter-cultural actions are more extreme, when it comes to drug abuse, stealing, casual sex and contact with prostitutes, he surpasses Holden by far. However, to the extent that one can measure counter-cultural attitudes, I do not believe Sal to be any more counter-cultural than Holden. Holden is just as aware of what he does not like in postwar American society and seems to have a clearer goal of finding ways to respond to it. Sal wanders restlessly around, moving from one geographical location to the other, when he senses stagnation or simply feels bored. My impression is that the open road is the sign of freedom to Sal. This leads to constant adventure, but inevitably one can never settle down and has to be constantly on the move. Holden believes that people are the worst part of society and that they will corrupt him if he is exposed to them. Sal escapes the institutions of postwar America and attempts to bring as many people as possible with him on a journey away from the aspects he finds damaging or boring. *The Catcher in the Rye* may have been even more critically acclaimed, sold in even larger numbers and may have been more debated than *On the Road*. I still believe that the autobiographical aspect, combined with the social movement in *On the Road* created a broader appeal in counter-cultural circles. I am not in any way saying that *The Catcher in the Rye* did not appeal to the same young people as *On the Road* and many other books. I am merely stating that the fact that Kerouac informed restless youth in the 1950's that there existed an alternative society to the boring one they lived in, helped create a larger counter-cultural movement where he, quite unwillingly, became "King of the Beats."⁹⁵

J.D. Salinger, in my opinion, achieved more than Jack Kerouac when it came to finding a personal counter-cultural solution to postwar society. He lived a less extreme version of Holden's escape plan, namely a rural detached lifestyle, which he continued until his early nineties, constantly avoiding the press and refusing to sell film rights to *The Catcher in the Rye*.⁹⁶ By doing so, he denied Hollywood the possibility of taking control over his counter-cultural book, which would have left it in the hands of profit-seekers who would want to "show" the consumer their interpretation of Holden's message. This might possibly have spread some of Salinger's message to a larger audience, but at the same time it might easily have destroyed the story, as people and institutions Salinger despised would then control the dissemination of his message.

⁹⁵ <http://www.allenginsberg.org/index.php?page=bio>

⁹⁶ <http://kirjasto.sci.fi/salinger.htm>

Kerouac lived a more unsettled life; he had disagreements with factions of the Beat milieu, lived restlessly in search of enlightenment through Buddhism and travel, but was finally damaged by alcohol and drugs. This caused his death at the age of 47. He might not personally have achieved his goals of enlightenment, and the impression is that he was torn between conformity in the city and the appeal of the road, religion and drugs. However, his never-ending search and curiosity is a strong inspiration. This year *On the Road* will be released as a Hollywood movie. In my opinion, Hollywood always destroys the basic aspects of a counter-cultural creation, but given the time between the book's release in 1957 and the movie in 2012, it has served the purpose of inspiring many generations of youth before the movie potentially makes it lose some of its vitality and validity.

Though the authors ended up displaying their counter-cultural attitudes and living their lives in somewhat different ways, succeeding in various degrees, both characters come to terms with middle-class postwar American society in their books. Holden chooses to stay and face the consequences with school and his parents, not only because he sees that isolation is no solution, but also to be with his sister as he finds out that she is possibly the only thing left in the world which he really loves. Sal has shown a shifting attitude throughout *On the Road*, switching between New York and the road, depending on where his motivation is. Seemingly, the prospect of a woman's love leads Sal to give up the road for a life of family and perhaps even conformity. "I want to marry a girl; I told them, 'so I can rest my soul with her till we both get old. This can't go on all the time – all this franticness and jumping around. We've got to go someplace, find something.'" (111) Here Sal gives the impression that one cannot stay on the road forever; he has had his kicks, but he also has ambitions of writing books based on his adventures and of finding a woman to love. This shows that he has also had other ambitions, which could lead him back to society. Holden would probably classify Sal as a phony for compromising, but in the end they both capitulate to society. Not from the pressures of capitalism, consumerism or "phoniness", but for the prospect of being close to people they love.

Chapter Four: *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*

Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture, published in 1991 is Douglas Coupland's debut novel about three people in their mid to late twenties who escape their old lives and jobs by resettling in the desert area around Palm Springs, California. The term Generation X is credited to the author Paul Fussell in his book *Class* from 1983, where he wrote about an up-and-coming X generation. According to Fussell, "generation X is a term to define people who choose to abandon the rat race in society where people chase money, status and social climbing."⁹⁷ The term was later adopted by Douglas Coupland as the title of his book depicting the outsider culture of American young adults in the late 1980's and early 1990's. The term was quickly adopted, but altered somewhat negatively in meaning by the mass media and the baby-boomer generation, to refer to youth who they considered "slackers", a generation who grew up having it all, but who still complain and rebel. According to Douglas Brinkley: "The hijacking and distortion of the original observations made by Coupland and Linklater during 1992-3's media wave emanated partly from the Baby-Boomers who, feeling pummeled by recession and embarrassed by their own compromised 1960s values, began adopting a negative slant toward the group threatening to steal their spotlight."⁹⁸

Coupland wrote the book to give his generation a voice, as he felt that this generation was being wrongfully interpreted and criticized by older generations.⁹⁹ The main characters Andy (the narrator), Dag and Claire in *Generation X*, are in fact far from slackers. Measured by mainstream Western society's norms, they might be seen as more laid-back than most people. They all have college degrees and come from what seem to be upper-middle-class families. Yet they are all employed in low-paying service sector jobs that are far beneath their educational level, occupations that are called McJobs by Coupland. (5) Marriage does not seem to hold any interest and they openly denounce most of the values of mainstream society. This counter-cultural rebellion is a deliberate revolt, as all three have left their old life in corporate businesses in larger cities in protest against what they see as an alienating consumer society. *Generation X* tells the story of their lives

⁹⁷ Paul McDonald, 2004, "The Utopias and Dystopias of Generation X", *European contributions to American studies*, Band, 51, 220, <http://membres.multimania.fr/coupland/details1.html>

⁹⁸ Laura Slattery, 1999, "Generation X to Generation Next", *Egoist*, available online: <http://barneygrant.tripod.com/GenxLS.htm>, 19

⁹⁹ Mark Muro, "Baby Buster's Resent life in Boomers' Debris", *The Boston Globe*, (Boston, City Edition, November 10, 1991)

in Palm Springs in chapters named after their counter-cultural thoughts and actions. The chapters are all accompanied by ironic illustrations and newly invented terms at the bottom of a random selection of pages. These terms are coined by Coupland to define groups of people and aspects of the capitalistic consumer society (and the X'ers rebellion against them) and are meant to clarify how the main characters think, such as naming a cubed section of an office landscape "the veal fattening pen." (24).

Before I begin to create a counter-cultural profile of the book and its characters, I think it is important to give a short description of the conditions in American society at the time the book depicts. The Yuppie bubble of the 1980's has burst, and the main characters are living during an economic downturn, causing the book to include much resentment against ex-hippies who have become yuppies. The location being Palm Springs is seemingly chosen as it had been a prospering place since the 1920's, but in the 1980's and 1990's it had begun on a downturn, and Yuppies only passed through on vacations while the permanent residents were more of the shady types. (25)¹⁰⁰ Their parents were young adults in the 1960's, a time of both moral looseness in the hippie culture and a great increase in educational levels, wages and technological advancements. In other words, Andy, Dag and Claire have grown up in comfortable affluent environments full of the promises of the American Dream.

However, the 80's "Yuppie bubble" burst and they all found themselves working in unsatisfying conditions for less than what their parents had been used to. This explains some of their alienation and frustration. Unlike the books from the 1950's, these characters did not grow up during the emergence of a consumer society. They grew up with parents who are the results of this culture and with new technology, such as the personal computer and new media such as MTV. The main characters have been bombarded with images of consumer goods and the lifestyles of the rich and famous. Unlike the previous books, where the characters seem more spontaneous and searching, Andy, Dag and Claire are fully aware of what aspects of society they have been damaged by and attempt to avoid. Besides consumerism, they are opposed to dead-end jobs and an older generation claiming the moral high ground. Their parents' generation from the beat and hippie period could lay claim to a certain moral superiority because, besides experimenting with sexuality and illegal substances, they were part of an idealistic movement which protested against and targeted unfairness in the world, by demonstrating for equality and civil rights and against

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.preservationnation.org/magazine/story-of-the-week/2004/palm-springs-tramway.html>

the Vietnam War.¹⁰¹ However, during this period their personal opportunities were plentiful, as middle-class America was blooming. In other words, most middle-class white youth in the 50's and 60's did not have to worry so much about their personal lives and could dedicate themselves to fighting injustice in the world at large. For a generation who had members that attended student sit-ins and similar activities for the sake of helping others, it is easy to criticize members of Generation X as being self-centered and egotistical, since they rebelled to better their own lives or the lives of people from the same background. According to Paul McDonald, both the Beat generation and Generation X started their rebellion against the background of "anti-capitalism, idealism and social non-conformity," in other words many of the same ambitions. However, he goes on to observe that the beat culture was commercialized and adopted by mainstream America, thereby destroying its fundamental values.¹⁰² The beat and hippie cultures were commercialized, and as their members grew up and at the same time had great economic opportunities, the movements died away and instead many ex-members prospered quickly and became defined by the new term Yuppies. McDonald's statement that "structure needs anti-structure, and counter-culture only reinforces the status quo", can be used to point out this repetitive cycle of how counter-culture loses its vitality while mainstream society prospers by co-opting it.¹⁰³

The life of a person from Generation X seems somehow to be structured the opposite way. They grew up in homes with stable economies and parents who had both done morally good deeds as idealistic protesters and later succeeded in realizing their own ambitions. When the Generation X member leaves home, on the other hand, he finds a dwindling number of opportunities compared to what his/her parent generation met, as the economy was now stagnant.¹⁰⁴ The Cold War was ending and civil rights and equality were supposedly achieved for both genders and all races.¹⁰⁵ I am not saying there were no worthy causes in the world to fight for, but seemingly Generation X members' most important issues were domestic and personal. Their problems revolved around dwindling opportunities for their generation, caused by the downturn in a consumerist economy that their parents' and grandparents' generations had created and prospered from. The

¹⁰¹ Sherry B. Ortner. 1998, "Generation X: Anthropology in a Media-Saturated World", *Cultural Anthropology*, Band, 13, Number, 3, 418

¹⁰² Paul McDonald, 2004, "The Utopias and Dystopias of Generation X", *European contributions to American studies*, Band, 51, number, 220

¹⁰³ McDonald Paul, 2004, "The Utopias and Dystopias of Generation X", 223

¹⁰⁴ Matt Dunne. 1997 "Policy Leadership, Gen X Style", *National Civic Review*, Band 86, no 3, 252

¹⁰⁵ <http://americanhistory.si.edu/subs/history/timeline/end/index.html>

postmodern economy was a global one, where wars and conflicts could cause economic downturns. At the same time many manufacturing jobs were outsourced, as production became cheaper in less developed countries. In other words, more young people competed for fewer jobs that demanded a higher education, at the same time as economic growth was lower than when their parents' generation grew up.

Andy, Dag and Claire also have a distaste for what families have become. Their generation had a many-doubled chance of growing up with parents who chose to divorce compared to what their parents' generation had.¹⁰⁶ Andy's parents are still married, but as he sees it, obviously not happily. They are in no situation he wishes to strive to reach (even though he wants love sort of: "I want to fall in love. Or at least I think I do, I'm not sure. It looks so messy.") (53). Their lack of a meaningful family life is shown by how he dreads going home for Christmas and the fact that only one of his six siblings spends Christmas with them. (120, 154) Claire's parents are divorced, and she has a seemingly unending trail of step-siblings who are snobs she cannot relate to. (37) Such an insecure family life, combined with a world that does not seem to offer them happiness or success, is key to their anger and choice of lifestyle. Andy clearly blames his parents and believes they had a much easier time: "I want to tell them that I envy their upbringings that were so clean, so free of *futurelessness*. And I want to throttle them for blithely handing over the world to us like so much skid-marked underwear." (98)

All three believe globalization is a major cause for the existence of these problems no matter where you come from in the developed world. Andy is from Portland, Oregon, Claire is from Los Angeles, California and Dag is a Canadian from Toronto. Yet their stories are all the same according to Andy, as "where you're from feels sort of irrelevant these days ("Since everyone has the same stores in their mini-malls, according to my brother Tyler"). (5) They have all ended up in Palm Springs for the same reasons, though they were not in the same line of work. They all dreaded the same aspects of their working lives so much that an escape from not only the job itself, but also from the whole lifestyle centered on the job and the city, became inevitable. Dag worked in advertising, had a fancy car and seemed successful at work, but the thought of being stuck in the same cubicle for years into the future, doing a job he feels "enslaves" the third world and is located in a claustrophobic environment, makes him so sick that one day he hits rock bottom. (22) Dag targets his anger at his boss, saying to his face: "you have won a genetic lottery being born

¹⁰⁶ <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/socy/vanneman/socy441/trends/divorce.html>

at the right time in history, you would last about ten minutes if you were my age these days.” (26) He points out how unfair it is that his “boss spends time bragging about his multimillion dollar homes, while the staff can hardly afford Kraft dinners.” (26) Dag clearly believes himself and his generation to be at least as competent as their parent generation, but in his opinion the older generation has reduced his opportunities drastically. Coupland defines this attitude as Boomer Envy: “Envy of material wealth and long-range material security accrued by older members of the baby boom generation by virtue of fortunate births.” (26) Dag walks out in a rage and does not look back.

Claire works in the fashion industry in what Coupland calls an Anti-Sabbatical job: “A job taken with the sole intention of staying only for a limited time period with the intention of raising enough funds to partake in a more personally meaningful activity.” (40) Claire wants to escape to a place where people who share her mindset can gather, contemplate and read, and therefore she settles in Palm Springs. (41) Andy knows Japanese and worked in a “teenybopper” magazine in Tokyo, where he believes he is singled out from the crowd and liked by his boss for being an American Male, a situation he is uncomfortable with. (61-62) His boss is similar to Dag’s, a man bragging about his merits to people who have a lot less. (62) Andy becomes so uncomfortable that he loses his temper in his boss’s office and walks out in the same manner as Dag. (66)

This disgust with their lives and hatred of the older generation are what causes them to randomly meet in Palm Springs. According to Andy, “youth failed us, college failed us and mom and dad failed us. Not only this, but class and sex failed us.” (36) Seeing that these factors have failed them, he cannot see himself in a situation where he can find safety in an environment surrounded by modern commodities and people who symbolize his downfall. After hitting rock bottom, they apparently analyzed their situations and believed themselves to have found an answer that could put some meaning into their lives. They chose to live on the outskirts of society: “We live marginalized on the periphery and there is a lot we choose not to participate in. We wanted silence and we have that silence now.” (14) Andy is very clear in his belief that working a tedious job where you receive no gratitude makes you so dead inside that you are fooled into believing that “shopping is creativity and renting a video on Saturday night is enough” (14) to secure happiness. He tells the reader that when they managed to discard these habits and jobs and go to Palm Springs, they all felt more content. They now practice a lifestyle Coupland defines as lessness: “Reconciling oneself with diminishing expectations of material wealth, and only wanting to find happiness and a meager living.” (60)

Generation X is in many ways an existentialist novel, where behind all the criticism of their old lives lies an intention of determining their own future based on their own wishes and motivations and not what society and families want from them. Existentialism is a philosophy that believes that you can decide your own “destiny” based on your own free choices. In order to take the best possible control over your life, you need to eliminate the factors you do not control in this world.¹⁰⁷ This is exactly what Andy, Dag and Claire are attempting to do by quitting their jobs, cutting down on consumption and living on the outskirts of society, still connected somewhat to modern-day America, but contributing as little as possible. While living in Palm Springs, they keep thinking about how they can best fulfill their existentialist needs, and conclude that they will one day start up a hotel in rural Mexico as the solution to their goal of complete retreat from modern society.

In Palm Springs Dag and Andy work together in a bar. The pay is less than in their old jobs, but there are no pressures, it covers their expenses, and they seem to have large amounts of free time. Coupland calls this “occupational slumming: Taking a job well beneath one’s skill or educational level as a means of retreat from adult responsibilities and/or avoiding possible failure in one’s true occupation.” (130) In their free time they often go for outings and tell each other stories. As they all admit they struggle with sharing emotions, Andy from personal experience creates their own equivalent to AA meetings, except that they share fantasy stories with symbolic meanings, dreams, fears and personal issues instead of stories related to alcohol abuse. (16) I believe this has a symbolic meaning, revealing a desire that they through these somewhat therapeutic talks can manage to let go completely of issues and bonds from the future that have latently lingered in their minds, thus completing a transfer to a new and more wholesome life.

Palm Springs is seemingly cut off from the world they once lived in. According to Claire, most people who live there permanently have criminal backgrounds, deal in a shady form of business, or are escaping something. (41) In other words, Palm Springs is their perfect location, because no one who represents the “evils” of the cities they have escaped from is in Palm Springs on a permanent basis. They have managed to cut themselves off from the world they used to live in, in most respects. They do not contribute to capitalism in their “veal fattening pens” anymore; they have broken with their parents’ expectations of their careers by exchanging their old jobs with McJobs as bartenders and as a shop assistant, and they respond negatively to consumerism. (75,123)

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/sartreol.htm>

As previously mentioned, like people with counter-cultural attitudes such as Thoreau and Kerouac, they practice a form of middle way instead of complete withdrawal. For their own comfort they have apartments, cars, cigarettes and alcohol, but they are skeptical of displaying any attitudes that might make them seem to be contributing to the capitalist society they have abandoned. Seemingly satisfied with their own solution to leave so many of modern society's evils behind, they have still brought with them many fears instilled in them by modern society. Television and other media in the days they grew up had focus on HIV and nuclear war between the USA and the Soviet Union. They are aware that especially nuclear war or a nuclear meltdown can be hard to escape whether you live in remote mountains or in the middle of the city. This threat has been created by our modern society and cannot be escaped by discarding the modern world. They spend time telling symbolic stories about their fear that it is impossible to escape a potential disaster. (81) Dag is so fascinated by the subject that he brings Claire a jar of something described as crystallized green sand beads from where a nuclear bomb was tested in New Mexico. A heated debate over the danger level of this gift causes the jar to break and spill its contents all over Claire's floor. They fear the worst, that the jar may have contained plutonium, and Claire decides to move over to Andy's. (87) This signals that no matter what they do and how "successful" they are in repudiating modern society, they can still be damaged by it. In reality, the risk of a nuclear disaster might not have been so large in the 1990's California desert, but the fact that the fear is inescapable shows that modern media and propaganda have managed to leave their scars. Patrick Neate might have a point, especially in relation to the protests of the 90's when he in an article about Generation X as a phenomenon claims that "Andy, Dag and Claire have been handed a society priced beyond their means. Twentysomethings, brought up with divorce... and scarred by the 1980s fall-out of yuppies, recession, crack and Ronald Reagan, they represent the new lost generation - Generation X."

"Fiercely suspicious of being lumped together as an advertiser's target market, they have quit dreary careers and cut themselves adrift... "Unsure of their futures, they immerse themselves in a regime of heavy drinking and working at McJobs... Underemployed, overeducated, intensely private and unpredictable, they have nowhere to direct their anger, no one to assuage their fears, and no culture to replace their anomie..."¹⁰⁸ I believe this

¹⁰⁸ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/generation-x-the-slackers-who-changed-the-world-436651.html>

statement to be partly correct, as it highlights the background for the emerging protest in the 90's.

Social class has also left scars on Andy, Claire and Dag who are all white middle-class persons. My impression is that they would rather have come from either lower or higher social standings, because as a person from the middle class no one will feel sorry for you or remember you for any greatness: "You have to live with the fact that history will never champion your causes and that history will never feel sorry for you. It is the price that is paid for day-to-day comfort and silence. And because of this price, all happiness are sterile; all sadnesses go unpitied." (171) Through the voice of Andy, one gets the impression of internal confusion and struggle. The bitterness targeted at their parents' generation seems partly to be based on a feeling of entitlement. They grew up with a good and stable life and seem to have expected this to continue or even improve. They have grown up with factors such as their suburban life, parental expectations and MTV, which portrays the lifestyles of the cool, the rich and the famous, something which can lift expectations to quite unrealistic levels. Their counter-cultural reaction was to escape consumer society and middle class job pressures when they realized that they would not be able to move upward in society. With the new jobs they have now acquired, they are trying to escape their middle-class identification. At their bartending job, Dag and Andy can make fun of their boss, (130) and work just the necessary amount without pressures. They might be in their own comfort zone, but they are still not completely satisfied. On their way home one day, Dag sabotages a fancy Aston Martin Convertible with his cigarette until the car catches fire, as if the owner has stepped on their toes personally by becoming economically successful while they are left bartending. (133-135) It gives me the impression that his lifestyle choice has been made by a person who has resigned and who secretly wishes he could be on the top of the social ladder. Andy tells Dag how silly it is to burn the Aston Martin with his cigarette, but Dag brushes the criticism off as if it was nothing and responds by letting Andy in on a secret dream he has. He wants to go to a remote area in Mexico to open a hotel, "for friends and eccentrics only" (134), with a minimum of commodities and his own rules to counter those of conventional hotels. In Dag's hotel one should tell stories over a drink of rum, and if you told good stories, you could stay for free and bathrooms could only be used if you drew graffiti jokes on the bathroom wall. (134) Dag apparently has a plan laid out for how he can escape American consumer society even further while bringing like-minded people with him and creating a

small counter-cultural heaven. Revealing his dream just after setting fire to an Aston Martin, gives me the impression that Dag is a very confused person.

Apparently he is not the only one who is confused while searching for a change of lifestyle. Claire's friend Catherine, nicknamed Elvissa by Andy (who seems to be interested in her), has come up to visit them. "Claire and Elvissa have left their old life in search of adventure and personal truth, this has put them on the margins of society, this Andy believes takes some guts as he believes this is harder to do for women than men." (100) Not surprisingly, he admires their choice, and the admiration grows further when Elvissa leaves them to start a job as a gardener at a nunnery. (137) Claire pinpoints the reason for their admiration when Dag seems angered that Elvissa has left: "She is at the next level. You're hanging on still, even though your job-job and the big city are gone – hanging on to your car and your cigarettes and your long-distance phone calls and the cocktails and the attitude." (140) What Elvissa is attempting to do is to completely let go of the middle-class America she grew up in, which is indeed one step further than Andy, Dag and Claire's life on the periphery in Palm Springs, where the gang sits and tells dreamy stories about opening that Mexican hotel. Coupland uses two terms to explain the restless nature of post-middle-class counter-cultural visions and ambitions. The first is "Terminal Wanderlust: A condition common to people of transient middle-class upbringings. Unable to feel rooted in any one environment, they move continually in the hopes of finding an idealized sense of community in the next location." (199) The second term used is "Emallgration: Migration toward lower-tech, lower-information environments containing a lessened emphasis on consumerism." (201) These terms do not only explain Elvissa's counter-cultural behavior, but Andy's, Dag's and Claire's as well. The hotel Dag told Andy about, which Andy found very appealing, is pictured as being stripped of modern-day commodities except for ten-watt bulbs and small bars of soap. (134) Dag and Claire are also smitten by "terminal wanderlust", and one day when Andy comes back from work, he finds a note on his door where they tell him that they have left for their future hotel in Mexico. By doing so without him, but having taken his two dogs along, they are pushing him to follow his small community instead of talking them out of the idea. (199) I believe that the media used by Andy, Claire and Dag when they were part of the urban middle-class, such as magazines and television, alongside their parents comfortable economy, actually created the motivational factors of their "terminal wanderlust", even if their curious wandering on to the next destination is to escape the modern world. What I am attempting to say is that growing up with a decent economy allowed them to travel and see

new exciting destinations at a young age, possibly creating more curious and open-minded persons. Even though this is not discussed directly in the book, it is quite obvious that contemporary magazines and television directed toward middle-class men and women frequently focus on how one shall experience the world to grow and find happiness. Advertising and television shows tell people how easily one can go for a road trip or board a plane to an exotic destination and this way enhance the quality of your life. If Andy, Dag and Claire had not grown up in middle-class America, their escape to Mexico or the mindset that created this idea might not have been there, as they would not have heard about such possibilities. In other words for once they can thank the world they despise for planting a seed in them that provides the best solution to their counter-cultural activity, namely a complete escape from middle-class society and consumerism.

Richard Linklater, the director of a movie called *Slacker* that depicts Generation X'ers,¹⁰⁹ counters the baby-boomers' view on Generation X, the idea that they were apathetic "whiners". Linklater states that "Generation X'ers withdrew from society in disgust, not apathy,"¹¹⁰ and Bruce Tulgan observes that their "skepticism was not born out of naivety and immaturity, nor was it born of a temporary idealism, but rather of shrewdness and experience. Xers' cynicism, he claims, resulted from growing up during an era marked by a substantial deterioration in the constancy of social, religious, political and business institutions, but it seems more likely that the growth in cynicism was a result of an overdosing of 1980's consumerism and media training."¹¹¹ According to these theories about Generation X, people like Andy, Dag and Claire did not make these choices because they were lazy, they were motivated by moral integrity and an "overdose" of exposure to traits of modern consumer society,

Andy eventually packs up and follows his friends down to Mexico, where he en route to team up with Dag and Claire has a special moment. I will not go into detail, but it is a small and strange moment that manages to leave him with "a crush of love unlike anything he had ever known." (207) This moment I believe signifies that Mexico was the right choice, and that he has been able to attain a certain measure of both freedom and happiness through his counter-cultural life choices.

As quoted earlier, Coupland wanted this generation to be heard and thus provided them with a voice throughout this book. He has not merely written a story about the

¹⁰⁹ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0102943/>

¹¹⁰ Laura Slattery, 1999, "Generation X to Generation Next", *Egoist*, 19

¹¹¹ Ibid, 19, 20

lifestyle of misled youth, but he has analyzed and described through both the characters' stories and the terms and illustrations at the bottom of the pages what they dislike about mainstream society and why. The newly coined terms are counter-cultural acts in themselves, in my opinion, as Coupland takes an already existing product, situation, person or term and flips it upside down as if the Generation X'ers were able to dictate the language. These terms clarify aspects of the modern world that trouble people from Generation X and also make clear to the reader why certain things are desirable or not desirable from their special perspective. A few examples worth mentioning to clarify my point are: "Divorce Assumption: A form of safety net-ism, the belief that if a marriage doesn't work out, then there is no problem because partners can simply seek divorce." (39) "Poorochondria: Hypochondria derived from not having medical insurance." (83) "Poor Buoyancy: The realization that one was a better person when one had less money." (92) "Tele-parablizing: Morals used in everyday life that derive from TV sitcom plots "That's just like that episode where Jan lost her glasses!" (138) The reason I have added these examples to those I have already used in the context of the main characters' lives, is because these terms have their own important story to tell. They are not directly linked to Andy, Dag and Claire's story, but give Coupland an opportunity to explain more aspects of Generation X'ers counter-cultural mindset. The main characters only use a certain number of the terms Coupland places on the bottom of randomly selected pages, yet they can be easily linked to the characters' mindset and everyday life. In a sense Coupland feeds the reader Generation X ideology with a teaspoon, making it easier to grasp their dissatisfaction with the society their parents' generation have created for them to live in.

Andy, Dag and Claire all seem to have escaped from contemporary American society at the end of the novel, before the decline and ultimate demise of their generation. What really happened to Generation X is the same as I explained happened to the beat and hippie culture, which also happened to the punk scene before it was Generation X and grunge's turn, but with Generation X it seems to have happened even faster. The vitality of Generation X was largely destroyed by the consumerism its members so fiercely opposed. Hollywood produced movies such as *Reality Bites*,¹¹² Pepsi altered the term Generation X to Generation Next and targeted the demographic group in their campaigns,

¹¹² <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110950/>

while their most dominant musical force, the band Nirvana, was first signed by a major label and then dissolved after the suicide of lead singer Curt Cobain.¹¹³

I believe that Laura Slattery is right when she claims that “the X’er culture was a media assisted rebellion.”¹¹⁴ The fact that the speed of media development had increased with the internet and cable television first helped to spread the culture, but the more quickly these developments progress, the easier it is for the members of consumer society to purchase a pair of Converse shoes, cut holes in their jeans and buy Nirvana CD’s, to jump on the bandwagon and thus dissipate the movement. The cycle apparently repeats itself, and by the time I write this, a new group has been defined as the next one with a new mindset of expectations, dreams and counter-cultural attitudes that collide with mainstream society, called Generation Y, referring to people born between 1978 and 1990.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Laura Slattery, 1999, “Generation X to Generation Next”, *Egoist*, 20

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 21

¹¹⁵ http://www.usatoday.com/money/workplace/2005-11-06-gen-y_x.htm

Chapter Four: *Fight Club*

Fight Club was written by Chuck Palahniuk and published in 1996. It is a novel about an unnamed male protagonist approximately thirty years old. He goes from living a tedious life employed in corporate America to becoming the leader of a movement which attempts to defy and destroy modern society as we know it. The unnamed protagonist uses the name Joe in phrases throughout the book, and I have chosen to use this name when referring to him. Joe works for an auto company, calculating the cost of recalling cars with defects versus the company's costs in a court settlement with the vehicle owners. (30) Throughout the week Joe wakes up jetlagged at a new airport, and from this he develops insomnia. He approaches his doctor to get medical help. Convinced that the insomnia is caused by other problems in Joe's life, the doctor says, "If you want to see real pain, you should swing by First Eucharist on a Tuesday night. See the degenerative bone diseases. See the cancer patients getting by." (19) Joe starts attending support groups as a "tourist", as an unconventional attempt to cure his insomnia, which seemingly stems from displeasure with his job and modern society. He manages to loosen up and cry during the hugging ceremonies, which temporarily leads to sleep. Another freeloader named Marla Singer begins showing up and threatens to blow his cover. This once again disrupts his sleep, leading him over to the beginning of his counter-cultural solution. He meets an eccentric man named Tyler Durden. (32) Tyler works peculiar jobs in the evenings, usually adding pranks and sabotage to his work, such as urinating in food while catering for up-scale parties and splicing genital pictures on to movie reels as an oppositional reaction to modern society. (29) Joe's apartment and all his commodities get blown up, this is done by Tyler without Joe knowing. Unsure of where to go, Joe seeks out Tyler. Tyler, seeing that Joe is frustrated, challenges him to a fistfight to blow off steam. The feeling of punching and getting punched is supposedly very liberating, and they attract an increasingly large following of white middle-class men who apparently need this as an escape from their dreary day-to-day lives in corporate America. Fight Club gives each member a counter-cultural arena to let out frustrations, but it does not solve the problems they see in modern society. Fight Club is a place men come to fight each other to avoid fighting the demons they are afraid to confront, but Fight Club also increases self-confidence, which possibly gets projected back to their lives in society. "Most guys are at fight club because of something they're too scared to fight. After a few fights, you're afraid a lot less." (54)

Tyler takes Fight Club a step further by recruiting members he believes are ready for a larger challenge and introduces them to what he calls Project Mayhem. Project Mayhem begins with small-scale sabotage targeted toward consumer society and capitalism, but escalates into an attempt to destroy postmodern civilization and exchange it with a world based on old American notions of personal freedom and hunter-gatherer qualities where the strongest survive. Joe and Tyler create what can be interpreted as a combination of a temple and a military barracks where they train members of Project Mayhem in their oppositional project.

What Joe does not realize until the end of the book, is that he is Tyler and that Tyler sprung out of his insomnia, often operating while Joe believed himself to be asleep. Tyler is created in his mind as a desperate solution to his need for a strong counter-cultural leader. Tyler does what Joe would only earlier wish for in his sub-conscious mind. Tyler represents all the qualities Joe himself lacks but needs to break free from in his tedious and depressing circle of life. Together they embark on a counter-cultural journey where they attempt to liberate themselves and men in similar situations from capitalism, consumer society and the feminine world they claim to live in. Many of them grew up without father figures. Joe observes that “What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women” (50), so they are trying to define and reclaim masculinity and old frontier notions through Fight Club and Project Mayhem.

Consumerism and the “feminization of America” are closely linked.¹¹⁶ The “feminization of America” is usually taken to include various factors, from increased focus on shopping and the disappearance of traditional masculine jobs, to the increased divorce rate that has left many young men to be raised by single mothers.¹¹⁷ This can be combined with the young men feeling alienated and oppressed as small players in an increasingly globalized world where Joe, Tyler and their followers feel that their mediocre lives represent a failed American Dream.¹¹⁸ Here I would like to draw some parallels to facts and statistics from the real world, which support why Palahniuk’s male characters feel so alienated and depressed that they try to break out of society and attempt to tear it down. I have chosen to use statistics from both Norway and the USA in the 1990’s, as this is the time period the book depicts. I am aware that the USA is far more multicultural and less

¹¹⁶ John McCullough, 2005 “Tedium and torture: Fight Club, globalization and professionals in crisis, (*CineAction*), as found on the following web site: (<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Tedium+and+torture%3A+Fight+Club,+globalization+and+professionals+in...-a0129813693>)

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ Ibid

homogeneous because of larger geographical and social differences, but both countries are highly developed countries in the Western world, and the fact that the statistics regarding young men are similar in both nations, I believe shows that the feeling of discontent and depression in *Fight Club* represents a large group of young men outside the U.S. as well. Men in both the USA and Norway had a much higher suicide rate than women.¹¹⁹ George E. Murphy, a psychiatry professor at Washington University School of Medicine, has observed that women more often communicate about their feelings and more often than men seek psychiatric help.¹²⁰ This is information that can be seen to be relevant, especially for Joe, but also for many of the other males in the novel. Joe feels there is no place where people with problems like his own can go. This is why his desperate measure is to attend support groups for completely different diagnoses. He also admits that this is the only place where he can open up and cry, symbolizing that perhaps men hold on to an old notion that they are supposed to be strong and not reveal their problems to other people.

Being a middle-class male then gives two reasons not to seek help. Firstly, their class status makes society believe that they do not have “real” problems, and secondly their gender makes it harder for them to seek help. Norway’s Statistisk Sentral byrå (Statistics Norway) have statistics showing that coming from a divorced family increases anti-social behavior and increases the suicide rate in men only.¹²¹ The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services also operates with unstable family situations as a major factor as to why men have higher drop-out rates than women from high school.¹²² These real-life facts seem to have parallels in the book, where men are left trailing behind or on the outside of mainstream society. Being a generation of men raised by women has negative effects, and several indicators point to the fact that recent school reforms seem to suit girls better than boys, who are therefore handicapped in their career options. Such factors caused men in 1990’s America to have problems, as we can see in *Fight Club*. When Marla disrupts Joe’s support group visits, he has nowhere else to go, but is forced to find the solution to his problems by himself, greatly assisted by his “friend” Tyler.

I interpret the explosion in Joe’s apartment (carried out by Tyler) as a drastic but necessary action to force Joe to start from scratch and let go of the things that connect him to modern consumer society. Joe has previously substituted friends and experiences with trendy furniture and status commodities. With the commodities gone and having

¹¹⁹ <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/1998/11/981112075159.htm> <http://www.ssb.no/ssp/utg/200002/7.shtml>

¹²⁰ <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/1998/11/981112075159.htm>

¹²¹ <http://www.ssb.no/ssp/utg/200002/7.shtml>

¹²² <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/boys/FactSheets>

discovered newfound therapy in Fight Club, Joe can begin to let go of his former world, which was driving him toward a collapse. For a long time he has spent his work days in meetings that he knows his boss does not wish to attend (30), and to cope with his unhappiness at work and the insomnia he suffers from, he has upgraded his apartment and gone to the support groups for two years. (22) With his and Tyler's invention of Fight Club, he cannot only let go and create a small counter-cultural society on the sidelines of his old world, but he can begin to get back at all the people and phenomena he despises. Tyler is usually the instigator of their sabotage and terrorist acts, but since Tyler is another personality inside Joe whom Joe at first idealizes and follows, I interpret these ideas and emotions to have been suppressed and latent in Joe before he was liberated. As in *Generation X*, the problems depicted are largely those of the lower middle class; until discovering Fight Club Joe and many other young men have seemingly tried to put up with day-to-day life in an attempt not to complain, knowing their problems may seem "smaller" than what many others suffer from, but still feeling let down and desperately wanting change. Tyler calls them "God's middle children," (141) the ones no one notices or hears, and he feels that he would rather go to hell for his actions, having been heard, than to die without having been heard at all. (141) Tyler calls the men who dedicate themselves to working for his cause "space monkeys," and they become so dedicated to their cause that they attempt to castrate Joe for breaking one of the rules he made while acting as Tyler. Tyler is always a step ahead of Joe, giving the faithful such orders in case Joe should decide to back away from their joint counter-cultural projects. This signals two things; firstly that Tyler's ideas and rules have become bigger than himself, but more importantly it exemplifies that Project Mayhem has become a kind of secret society with its own rules outside of ordinary society. Their rules and actions are considered criminal by American law, but are followed regardless. In other words, the members have gone through a transition where they have replaced Modern American society with Project Mayhem.

Project Mayhem and Fight Club take counter-cultural behavior one step further than any similar movements depicted in the other books or in reality. While other characters and books often depict withdrawals from society, living on the fringes, or engaging in anti-social behavior as a means to show discontent with consumerism and capitalism, the members recruited from Fight Club to Project Mayhem have the extreme goal of bringing down contemporary American society. Tyler's schemes seem inspired by a desire to spite consumerism and capitalism in as many ways as possible. A great example is how the members of Project Mayhem steal fat from liposuction clinics and from Marla's

mother. (92) Not only do they use the fat to produce explosives, which they can later use in terrorist acts against various institutions in society, but their biggest “spit in the face” of consumerism is their production of luxury soap bars from the fat, selling the soap back to the women who have undergone the surgery by distributing it back to stores where rich people shop, for 20\$ apiece. (152)

The counter-cultural actions in *Fight Club* are both more extreme and more violent than in other movements, but they are not without their reasons. Previous counter-cultural acts were, as mentioned, more based on withdrawal, criticism of society through writing, singing, peaceful demonstrations and similar usually non-violent actions. However, the desperation seems to be much stronger in *Fight Club*, where Joe has become sick with insomnia, addicted to attending support groups on a daily basis, and is on the verge of taking his own life when he begins his counter-cultural protest. In the previous books the main protagonist has begun his counter-cultural activity at a point where he is bored with school, college or his job. In other words, Joe/Tyler, who have created the movements of Fight Club and Project Mayhem, begin their counter-cultural movement at a more desperate later stage in life.

It is not uncommon to romanticize past decades when engaging in counter-cultural activities, as one is usually fed up with the state of the society and time one lives in. This is perhaps why the main characters of all the books I have read search for a stage in life or history where capitalism and consumerism do not interfere in a negative way with their everyday life. Tyler is the one who usually speaks of the visions and means of Project Mayhem, and like Sal Paradise in *On the Road*, he romanticizes about the era when the American Dream was first established, the time of the Western Frontier. What appeals to him seems to be how it was every man for himself and how survival was based on your strength and good instincts in surviving nature, rather than on your qualifications for an office job or if you were born into the “correct” family. The Frontier Era was definitely a more masculine era, if we define masculine by old notions of hard physical labor, strength and endurance. It was also a more violent era where it was common for men to be in brawls or carry guns. I believe the violence appeals to Tyler and Joe not only because they feel alive and liberated by using violence in their Fight Club, but also for what they interpret as a masculine rebellious response to a more “feminine” society which has undermined or outdated common traits of masculinity. The sudden creation of Fight Club can be seen as an acute recognition of the demise of masculinity. Daniel Tripp states that: “These epiphanic moments signal a crisis of masculinity where the male protagonists come

to realize the degree to which their masculine identities are ‘increasingly commodified in America’s transition toward a postindustrial economy.’ ”¹²³ Jeanne Hamming backs up my argument of the appeal of old American ideals and values, when she describes the world these rebellious men attempt to create: “It is a space where, much like the western frontier of America’s cultural imagination, man can supposedly experience life free from the cultural restraints of media or capitalist manipulations.”¹²⁴ An interesting point brought up by Brad Bucknell, is that their wish for connecting man and nature again symbolizes a wish for a purer lifestyle which is cleaner and more real than lifestyles such as the one Joe had in his anti-social, technology-and commodity-focused job and condo.¹²⁵ In other words, they do not only attempt to reinstate old masculine values because they were raised by their mothers and because they find their jobs tedious, partly because they are less physically challenging than earlier in history. What seems to be a more significant motivation is their wish to counter the loneliness and isolation they feel in the midst of all the advertising, materialism and impersonal technology.

The fact that Joe/Tyler and their group of men feel both neglected and ignored, is most likely the reason why they wish to create such an extreme legacy. The reasons they feel neglected can be traced to the fact that most of them do not know their fathers, and that they feel like small pieces in big puzzles because of the modern job structure. Joe even explains his job as if he were a pre-programmed machine, all he did was calculate numbers. (30) The curse of the middleclass mentioned in *Generation X* is also applicable here, as the time period and group depicted are quite similar. This is based on the idea that those on top of society’s hierarchical ladder shape history, and that if you are on the bottom someone will champion your cause. Being in the middle seems to leave you in the lurch, you have no need to struggle for the basics of existence, nor are you doing something important that you get recognized for. (*Generation X*, 171) This statement is used in *Generation X* to state why the main characters from the middle class withdraw, because they feel alienated and ignored by society and history. I find this statement very relevant to *Fight Club* as well, because it supports Tyler’s statement about the members of Fight Club and Project Mayhem being God’s middle children. Additionally, it gives a somewhat clearer description of what middle-class people might go through and why Tyler wants them to be remembered for making history.

¹²³ Jeanne Hamming, 2008 “The feminine “nature” of masculine desire in the age of cinematic techno-transcendence”, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Band, 35. Number, 4, 146

¹²⁴ Ibid, 146

¹²⁵ Ibid, 146

As mentioned earlier, Joe feels very much alive in his first fight against Tyler, and there are several other points in the novel that also hint that the escalating counter-cultural activities may have been triggered by his desire for a more meaningful life. Joe's old life seemed very safe, but sterile. He has a nice, but lonely apartment, a safe but boring job involving similar-looking airports, cities, meals and hotels. This soon becomes tedious, and to compensate Joe went shopping and became caught up in consumerism, something he explains was common for young professionals. He spends time and money to "perfect" his home according to the conventional standards. Home to Joe is "a condominium on the fifteenth floor of a high-rise, a sort of filing cabinet for widows and young professionals." He also comments that "I wasn't the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue." (41,43) Joe goes on to explain how they all have the same things, and continues adding a list of commodities that he owns, finishing the section with "oh, yeah" (43) and "it took my whole life to buy this stuff" (44), as if he used to be really proud of this. However, he admits that he has stepped right into a negative consumerist spiral, "you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you." (44)

Marla also fails to feel alive until she begins attending the support groups where Joe goes. Here Palahniuk explains why these groups have a therapeutic effect on someone who would supposedly not have a problem. "All her life she never saw a dead person. There was no real sense of life because she had nothing to contrast it with. Oh, but now there was dying and death and loss and grief. Now that she knows where we're all going, Marla feels every moment of her life." (38) In a sense Marla shows the reader that getting stuck in a sterile life does not only happen to young men, but my point here is that their sense of living again starts the counter-cultural activity which gradually escalates from their therapy groups to Fight Club to Project Mayhem, and that fuelling this activity is not only the desire to get back at society, but a stronger and stronger need for feeling alive. As mentioned previously, Tyler seems to give expression to ideas suppressed in Joe's mind while he thinks he is asleep. Joe admits that one day he no longer gets a "buzz" (123) from Fight Club, and that therefore they "maybe needed to move onto something bigger. It was that morning Tyler invented Project Mayhem." (123) I think these quotes signify that their counter-cultural behavior is meant to liberate them, by giving them a sense of life and freedom when they pursue these activities. What happens eventually is that the ideas continue escalating until they become so extreme that Robert Paulson dies. (178) This

event causes Joe to attempt to break with Project Mayhem, and this creates a face-off between Tyler and himself. Joe attempts to shoot himself, now realizing that he is Tyler and that this is the only way to get rid of him. When he wakes up in a hospital, which he thinks might be Heaven, hospital workers, who are actually “space monkeys” in disguise meet him. This shows that many members became even more tangled into Project Mayhem than they were as “alienated slaves” in their old society; they just cannot stop, nor think for themselves anymore and what will happen to Project Mayhem is only a guess from there. (208)

A recurring theme for middle-class young men in the 1990’s seems to be entitlement. When Joe was fed up with his boss and his job, he used to buy things until the possessions he owned eventually came to own him. I was under the impression that Joe broke with consumerism ultimately when he moved in with Tyler and established Fight Club. However, when Fight Club does not give him the “buzz” he needs, he gives expression to a more fundamental alienation: “What Tyler says about being the crap and the slaves of history, that’s how I felt. I wanted to destroy everything beautiful I’d never have. Burn the Amazon rain forests. Pump chlorofluorocarbons straight up to gobble the ozone. I wanted to kill all the fish I couldn’t afford to eat, and smother the French beaches I’d never see. I wanted the whole world to hit bottom.” (123) Joe clearly feels entitled to a share of beauty and luxury, and in his bitterness for not getting his share of this, he wants to punish those who get a piece of the cake. This is clearly a sign of the anger and vengefulness in him, because of his failure to realize the American Dream.¹²⁶ This is also a revealing fact about Joe and many of his peers. He does not hate his job, his boss and the capitalistic consumer lifestyle mainly because he is morally disgusted by it. He hates it because it did not lead him to achieve and collect what he expected from it. Now capitalism and consumerism have failed him, leaving him unhappy with little to show for his work, and this is when Tyler starts putting ideas into Joe’s mind about creating a more masculine society based on old frontier notions, probably because Tyler thinks Joe has a better chance at succeeding in such a world. Tyler pictures Project Mayhem as destroying society, “creating a cultural ice age.” (125) He imagines “blasting the world free of history.” (124) Tyler daydreams of “Hunting elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center, and digging clams next to the skeleton of the Space Needle leaning at a forty-five-degree angle.” (124) Tyler seems to think that society has developed

¹²⁶ Jeanne Hamming, 2008 “The feminine “nature” of masculine desire in the age of cinematic techno-transcendence”, 146

in a manner that has left his group of men on the losing side. His utopian dreams, where he has been able to get rid of modern culture, seem to be a world based entirely on Darwinist principles of the survival of the fittest.

Tyler believes that if one wants to be saved, one cannot only give up money and possessions, one really has to hit rock bottom. (123) “Only after disaster can we be resurrected. It’s only after you’ve lost everything, that you’re free to do anything.”¹²³ In other words, Tyler believes that freedom is only to be found by complete withdrawal from modern society, not just in the sense of possessions, but that you have to feel pain as well. As Øystein Andersen writes about *Fight Club*, “there is a feeling of freedom in self-destruction.”¹²⁷ This Tyler shows Joe by using lye from their soap production to give him a chemical burn and using guided meditation to stop Joe from fainting. (75) When the pain begins to pass, Tyler observes: “You’re a step closer to hitting bottom. You have to see, ‘Tyler says,’ how the first soap was made of heroes. Think about the animals used in product testing. Think about the monkeys shot into space. Without their death, their pain, their sacrifice, we would have nothing.”(78) Tyler’s demands and the visions of Joe and the rest of the Project Mayhem movement seem like a blend of army regime and religious sacrifice. The religious aspect of feeling pain to become reborn is possibly linked to older American traditions, such as the Native American Sundance. This is a dance where dancers pierce strings to their upper body and to a tree, the dancer dances until he faints from fatigue and pain. The fall causes the strings to rip loose flesh from the dancer’s body. This dance is performed as a sacrifice, to control your body and to become reborn.¹²⁸ According to Tyler, rebirth through pain is necessary because “We don’t have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression.” (149) Tyler’s mission is then to free the members of Project Mayhem from this spiritual depression to give them the opportunity to free the rest of the world.

The space monkeys are to give up all possessions and follow strict orders on missions that bring them through sabotage and pain. Tyler wants each member to pick a fight with random men in the street and let these victims win to give these people a feeling of newfound power. (120) Through these missions Tyler achieves two goals. His Fight Club and Project Mayhem members complete sabotage tasks, which take the modern world

¹²⁷ Øystein Andersen. *Postmoderne overbelastning: En komperativ analyse av tre storbyromaner*, Masteroppgave i almennt litteraturvitenskap, 42

¹²⁸ <http://www.crystalinks.com/sundance.html>

one step closer to collapse, while his tactic also gives people a sense of freedom, possibly winning sympathy, loyalty and understanding if these “victims” feel the same sense of rebirth. Joe assaults Raymond K. Hessel for no other reason than to make him feel so alive that he the day after will start fulfilling his dreams according to Tyler’s plan. (154) After the assault, Tyler says through Joe: “Raymond K. K. Hessel, your dinner is going to taste better than any meal you’ve ever eaten, and tomorrow will be the most beautiful day in your entire life.” (155) Tyler claims that “he does not care if other people get hurt or not. The goal was to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history.” (122) I interpret this as a response to how the average man has become marginalized and insignificant in the modern world, which has become controlled by the capitalist corporations who have globalized the world. Globalization has created a distance between Tyler and the victims of his project, which is possibly why he feels so apathetic to the fate of strangers. According to Øystein Andersen, the city life depicted in *Fight Club* is created so that “each individual can have his or her needs covered without meeting or sharing with others.”¹²⁹ The development of technology has made the individual smaller. Earlier one might have had a sense of community different from what we have today, where phones, internet, TV-commercials and effective travelling have connected people all over the globe. In such a big picture it is clear that one person can feel small and powerless. I think this is one of the reasons why Tyler wants to reassert the feeling of power in his group members through their terrorist-inspired counter-cultural activities. He wants to create anarchy by erasing modern civilization. (125)

However, I think Tyler has failed in one crucial respect. He claims that he wants each man to feel power and wants to create an anarchistic state in the world. During Project Mayhem, however, he makes every member dress alike, live alike and get the same haircuts. I am under the impression that these rules undermine the individual he claims he wants to give a feeling of power. The Space Monkey project might seem a lot more alienating for the individual than working in a large corporation. As they are ordered to live together and work together, I believe they form bonds and camaraderie, which did not exist in large corporations. The downside is that instead of creating individuals with power, I believe Tyler is creating something similar to Communism or an extreme cult. Everybody is completely equal and seems to be molded into the same individual under a strictly controlled regime.

¹²⁹ Øystein Andersen. *Postmoderne overbelastning: En komperativ analyse av tre storbyromaner*, Masteroppgave I almenn litteraturvitenskap, 38

While Fight Club was created to liberate the individual from a tedious life in society, Project Mayhem was created to liberate all humans by the destruction of civilization. Tyler has asserted more control over the project, and Joe becomes somewhat sidelined. One day Tyler disappears and Joe feels stuck, not knowing what to do. He crosses the country visiting new Fight Club chapters in each city to search for Tyler. Each place he visits he is called Tyler, and gradually he understands and accepts that he is Tyler. Tyler shows up in a hotel room, where they have a heated discussion about who created who and which of them will be the last one standing when Project Mayhem has fulfilled its task. Joe then understands that Marla has not only been dating Tyler, but him, and he eventually realizes he has feelings for her. Previously Joe has thought that Marla is his annoying friend who begins to date Tyler, something he claims he does not like. Tyler is the only one of Project Mayhem's participants who is allowed to have a girl present; seemingly he makes adjustments to the rules to cover his need for love and affection. Now that Joe acknowledges his feelings for Marla, he has more reason to survive and win over Tyler's destructive plans that will most certainly lead to his death. At the same time Bob Paulson dies and Joe gets a sense of returning morale and emotion. He begins to understand that he created Tyler to be all he was not, a leader figure with vision. However, the leader figure he created has strangled the real Joe and let Project Mayhem get so far out of line that it will do more damage to people than good. In the end Joe and Tyler have a standoff at the top of the Parker Morris building that the Space Monkeys are about to blow up. Tyler sticks a gun into Joe's mouth, but Joe realizes they are the same person and attempts to kill himself in order to kill Tyler off, but he is only injured by the shot. The explosives in the Parker Morris building are faulty as well, and Joe wakes up in the hospital, and as mentioned, there he meets members of Project Mayhem dressed as nurses. This leads to an open ending where we do not know what will happen to Joe and Project Mayhem in the future.

There is no point in speculating whether Fight Club and Project Mayhem will go on. However, the main character has confronted his counter-cultural alter ego Tyler and killed destroyed him. My impression is that there are two reasons for this. Number one is that the counter-cultural terrorism and violence they were pursuing was creating a society perhaps worse than the existing one. Tyler did not want to care if people got hurt or not, neither did Joe until he noticed how the closeness of Bob Paulson's death affected him, and that a society with no regard for human injury, life or death is perhaps no better than the one he lives in. Realizing that he is in love with Marla might also make his normal life

worth living, as it now can be filled with a new meaning, closeness and emotion. Getting the girl in *Fight Club* quells the counter-cultural behavior in Joe.

I think that by writing this book, Palahniuk underwent a counter-cultural protest himself. It is like many other books an attack on all aspects of consumerism and capitalism, which we are exposed to and controlled by in a post-modernist society. He offers an extremely violent solution and criticizes the world for being much too controlled by women at a time when statistics still show that women have not yet achieved complete gender equality in society.¹³⁰ By unleashing a violent alternative to conformity, Palahniuk gathered a large cult following who actually opened various Fight Club chapters around the world. Just like Kerouac, he managed to create a real movement or at least add exposure and members to a movement whose time had come. I believe that Palahniuk was also responsible for the decision that killed the counter-cultural movement of Fight Club as well. This he did when he let Hollywood make a movie from his book, using two of Hollywood's biggest stars, Ed Norton and Brad Pitt, as the main characters. The movie undoubtedly spread the visions of Fight Club and Project Mayhem to a much larger audience, but it lost its counter-cultural validity when the concept was controlled and sold to movie audiences around the world by the capitalistic film business of Hollywood.

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http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/the_great_divergence/features/2010/the_united_states_of_inequality/the_usual_suspects_are_innocent.html

Chapter six: A comparison of *Generation X* and *Fight Club*

These two books I have just analyzed for counter-cultural themes and ideas are in some ways very similar, while they in other ways extremely different. Their distaste for post-modern American society stems from commonly shared views and attitudes. Characters in both books feel that their parents, TV and advertisements raised them to expect to become something equivalent to rich and successful rock stars or actors. Instead of achieving what they feel entitled to, they grow up with the American Dream failing them, leaving them with a grimmer future than their parents had. Both books criticize the divorce rate, but in *Fight Club* it has acquired a larger importance as Tyler explains to Joe and the Space Monkeys that their fathers represent God to them, while in *Generation X* the view on dysfunctional families and divorce is more subtle, portraying it more as extra baggage they do not need. When it comes to commodities, I find very similar views, although Joe perhaps collected items a bit more frantically than Dag and his friends, but they all took pride in their collections of items before their counter-cultural change. Though not the major focal point, especially not in *Generation X*, their choice of commodities was a way of defining themselves within society. After their transformation, Andy sarcastically tells his younger brother that he will not buy him Polo for Christmas, but a small gift of symbolic value. Joe goes further to get rid of his “nesting instinct of gathering collectables.” Without his knowledge, he has his counter-cultural alter ego Tyler blow up his apartment in order to rid himself of every single commodity.

Joe and Tyler introduce strict rules for living, where men who join their society can own no more than a few possessions and those have to be the same for every member. This however, is not only to rid each of the movement’s members of their possessions, it is probably also to make it harder to track their criminal activities. The main characters of both books believe the postmodern workplace causes depression and alienation, and that the speed and number of the various media alienate the individual or make each person feel very insignificant. There are reactions to this in each book, but it is not similar, and once again *Fight Club* chooses the more extreme measures. Tyler and Joe want attention, and this attention they seek to get through revenge and a defiance of all aspects of postmodern life and culture that can have damaged them. Tyler exclaims, “We want a cultural ice-age.” Andy and his friends make more subtle choices, which usually do not involve others. They choose withdrawal and assert no influence over others, except for perhaps a few friends,

while Tyler and Joe claim a moral high ground and want to enforce their views upon everyone else.

In both books the main characters are so frustrated and angry that they radically change their lives. What are recurring themes in *Fight Club*, which is perhaps no surprise considering its name, are violence and revenge. Extreme violence seems to symbolize an attempt to reinstate masculinity, while being their weapon of choice to achieve their goals. The books' plots are extremely different. *Fight Club* is a story of violence, sabotage and even insanity, while *Generation X* focuses more on moral discussions, escape and the search for a new and better lifestyle. There are of course lots of similarities as well: their age, the search for love, wanting a different world and critique of the world their parent's generation created. Both books are also filled with counter-cultural choices. *Generation X* however, is a lot more subtle and peaceful; violence is never used as a weapon, instead dialog and irony are the name of the game. The characters also seem far more attached to a reality that the reader can relate to. Masculinity is also focused upon to a much larger degree in *Fight Club*, where the whole revolutionary attempt is based on confused male roles. Both the main character and the author of *Generation X* are males, so in a sense the frustrations and the counter-cultural activities are mainly masculine, or at least created in the male mind. But along with Andy is Claire, a young woman who is equally frustrated. Perhaps this shows that the post-modern world I have described in my *Fight Club* chapter as involving the feminization of America, includes aspects that disgust some young women as well.

The characters in *Generation X* show no need to bring down society, though they from time to time show signs of jealousy toward those better off. They seem to acknowledge that the capitalistic and commodified world works for some, and without having invented an opposite alternative, they seem reasonably content to live on the fringes and feel that starting a hotel in Mexico with as few modern commodities as possible is a perfect solution for them and their peers. Such a solution would mean that they can use the aspects they enjoy from the modern world and reject those they do not wish or need to use. Like books from the 1950's, they seem to have been inspired by the attitudes of Thoreau. They acknowledge the journey and nature to a lesser degree, but they search for a middle way, and they escape to a less urban environment. When it comes to showing emotions, the main characters differ in the two books. The AA-inspired story-telling meetings Andy, Dag and Claire have in *Generation X* are a similar, but less dramatic version of the support groups Joe has to attend in *Fight Club* in order to open up. In other words, all the main

characters seem to struggle with their emotions, but Joe seems to be far more apathetic than the others, perhaps because his job revolves around dead and injured people in car wrecks and maybe this makes him feel the need to shut off his emotional involvement.

Fight Club seems to have chosen a more extreme reaction in response to the modern world, as peaceful protests have not worked previously in history, when it comes to scaling back capitalism and consumerism. *Fight Club* takes on a dictatorial attitude where the whole world has to follow their orders, instead of secluding their group of men from society. This attitude was perhaps created as they experienced that their weekly escapes through Fight Club were not enough and that they would need to free all of society completely. Joe and Tyler seem to seek society's recognition for their defiant actions, while Andy, Dag and Claire would rather live anonymously. What happens in *Fight Club* when their terrorist attacks escalate, is that Bob Paulson dies, causing Joe's emotions to return; Joe then accepts the love of a female when he acknowledges Marla. This makes him want to return to the world he despises with a reason to live for, which his previous violent behavior has made difficult. Andy, however, manages to free himself by his more moderate choice of moving south of the border to create his own world independently of what goes on in modern American society.

Conclusion: A Comparison of the 1950's Counter-culture with the Counter-culture of the 1990's

The time gap between *The Catcher in the Rye*, *On the Road*, *Generation X* and *Fight Club* is between 30 and 40 years. Yet there are many similarities in the messages of counter-cultural protest, and the society they all want to criticize and escape from is based on many of the same values and principles in the 1990's as it was in the 1950's. Parents, capitalism, large corporations, advertising and Hollywood are still the targets of the rebellion, and common in all the four books is that the main characters seek a simpler lifestyle than the postmodern one. The counter-culture of the 1950's was largely an oppositional reaction to many elements of the newfound American wealth in postwar America. As the economy and technology developed rapidly, the average American's lifestyle was altered in important ways. Leisure time increased because of better wages and time-saving household technology. With money to burn and time on their hands, the focus on commodities, celebrities and status increased. At the same time, American politics was motivated by the red scare and the Cold War to target leftists and other outsiders, while the powers that be attempted to create a monoculture out of middle-class American behavior, to keep the USA both proud and safe. Both Holden and Sal felt alienated by this world. They did not like the pressures from authorities, the chase for status or acceptance, the phoniness and the sterile life in the comfort zone of middle-class America. They both seek out a world of their own, but fail to achieve it in any lasting way, as the love for women in Sal's case and mankind or family in Holden's case drag them back to society as they now have more to live for.

This is apparently what happened to many involved in counter-cultural activities in the 50's and 60's, and those who did not bow down under society's pressures certainly did not manage to undermine capitalism and postwar American values. This can easily be shown, because when a similar counter-cultural protest evolved in the 90's, it was targeted towards many of the same social and economic realities that dominated forty years earlier. Members of the Beat and later hippie culture gradually became involved in mainstream society, perhaps because counter-cultural protest lost its appeal, or perhaps they faced responsibilities, which forced them to take more part in mainstream society. There can of course be other reasons as well, but the point is that these generations did quite well for themselves measured in economic terms, ensuring that the post modern lifestyle revolving

around capitalism and consumerism flourished and continued to dominate mainstream America when the generation from the 90's counter-culture grew up. They observed their parents having reached the American Dream and were raised to believe that anything was possible, but in reality they faced much tougher prospects than their parents.

I believe this is one of the factors which makes the character of counter-cultural protest different in the books from the 90's. As mentioned, they are in opposition to many of the same aspects of society as in the 50's, but additionally they are disgusted by the fact that their parents' generation sold out their values in an attempt to maximize profits for themselves, leaving only the crumbs to their children's generation. Except perhaps for the prep school system, Holden and Sal were in general opposing a new economic order blooming as they grew up, based on capitalism, consumerism and the conformity and phoniness which follow it. When it comes to Andy and Joe, they grew up with the opposite attitude of Sal and Holden. Andy and Joe actually believed in capitalism and consumerism and attended college and got corporate jobs in order to work themselves up the ladder of the system. It was not until this system failed them, or they realized that it did not reward them as much as their dreams had promised them, that they started analyzing and rejecting the values of postmodern middle-class society.

When it comes to *Fight Club*, I believe that the violent attempt to overthrow society might be an idea Palahniuk got as a reaction to the failure of the hippies to have any influence on capitalism and the American authorities through the use of their peaceful methods. The violence is probably also a reaction to society's disapproval of masculine values. All the books show aspects of a masculine rebellion to a certain degree. *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Generation X* focus on this to a much lesser degree than *Fight Club* and in *Generation X* Claire is described as having the same conflict with society as the male characters. However, all the main characters are in opposition to a society where old-fashioned masculine values were becoming outdated and superfluous compared to the feminine values society seemed to embrace. It is a fact that more women entered the workforce between WWII and 1990 than ever before, they also enrolled in college and university in record numbers, and women have surpassed men both when it comes to grades and in number of students. Technology also lessened the burdens in the home, and traditional masculine values became jeopardized by a softer and less physically demanding society. Women were still taking most of the household responsibilities, but were experiencing a great increase in career and lifestyle opportunities. With a less physically challenging society surrounding them, it is obvious that a great many men saw their role

and power in society weakened and experienced a feeling of not being needed, after centuries of men taking pride in being the provider in the family.

The decades following World War II were the period when the society debated in all my selected novels was created. Sal and Holden grew up during the war, and as this new world was created during the postwar period, it is not so strange that some people came to question the new materialistic and commodified lifestyle. It seems as if Sal wants to escape more out of boredom and a sense of emptiness, while Holden recognizes a number of moral dilemmas. One can, however, tell that Sal and Holden grew up at an earlier time than Joe or Andy, as the roles of males and females are clearer in *On the Road* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. Sal seems to objectify the women he meets on his travels, except the potential love of his life, and he has an old-fashioned need to show his Mexican lover that he can provide and take care of her and her son. Holden also shows signs of a more old-fashioned view on gender in how he often attempts to impress his girlfriends.

Andy, Dag and Claire's world originally seems to have been filled with complacency, which turns into a frustration that leads to their break with mainstream society. They are aware of and often critical of the aspects of society that *Fight Club* connects to the feminization of society. However, they never put the labels feminine or masculine to the traits they observe or criticize, they are more direct and target issues more separately. Divorce and marital troubles their parents have are blamed for the strained relationships all the main characters have with both their parents and siblings, and perhaps as an excuse to promote being single in their late twenties. In *Fight Club* the anger is targeted toward absent fathers, but I would like to point out that the divorce rate causing so much anguish in both books from the 90's probably increased as women both became more economically independent and focused on self-realization. This made them less dependent on their husbands and made it easier for a woman to leave if a marriage was dysfunctional. In other words, however justified the reasons for divorce might be, I believe its increased numbers can be connected to the feminization of America.

In *Fight Club* the male protagonist gets out of his commodified boredom and seems to blame a feminization of society for many of his troubles, but who Joe and Tyler are really angry at are their fathers. In Tyler's words: "If you are male and you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God?" (141) They seem to hold their fathers responsible for what went wrong with both

themselves and society, as they feel entitled to having a father to guide them, and now instead they have to define masculinity themselves based on their own interpretations.

In all four books, middle-class society plays an important role in shaping the main characters' counter-cultural attitudes. Except for Holden, who seems to be of an upper-middle-class background, all the rest of the main characters appear to be from the lower middleclass. This social group had more time and money and acknowledged that for their children to succeed in a world where social connections as well as an academic education became increasingly valuable, they needed a certain upbringing. Middle-class parents created norms and expectations of how the young generation should be shaped in a certain way to make America function as efficiently as possible, and tried to make sure that their children fit into and understood the social rules, which would allow them success. Holden, Andy and Joe seem to reflect upon this, and Holden early on refuses to submit to an expected behavior and a career path that has probably has been picked for him by parents, authorities in school and social expectations. As already observed, Andy and Joe who begin their counter-cultural journey in the 90's, have attempted to live up to middle-class's expectations, but when they see that this offers no self-realization or happiness or economic success, they adopt a similar analytical and critical attitude to that of Holden, who is approximately 15 years younger when he decided to reject society's plans for him.

Sal is more split in his attempt to juggle conventional society and the counter-culture, he is not as analytical in his response to the potentially damaging factors of modern middle-class society, but he is very clear on the fact that it does not offer him enough fun, or the right kind of learning and experience. All except Joe and Tyler seem to acknowledge that they need, or at least want to maintain, certain aspects that have been created by modern society. Sal's most important commodity would be the car, as it is the symbol of his counter-cultural freedom, while Andy seems to modestly enjoy some comforts of modern America as long as he does not have to pursue a career in the rat race or have to focus on luxuries. Holden does not seem to want to bring much of the modern world with him in his projected escape from the phonies, but he enjoys leisure activities (perhaps not modern, but at least social) such as golf, going to bars and sometimes even the movies, although he wants to register that he despises the latter. In other words, except for Joe and Tyler who wish for a more radical change, they all seek toward a lifestyle or a world that can seem to be inspired by the one described by Thoreau in *Walden*.

This leads me to my next point of comparison, namely the focus on old American frontier values in each character's counter-cultural motivation. During both the 50's and

the 90's, traditional American notions such as freedom, individuality and space seem to be more of a focal point for these outcast characters than the modern aspects of middle-class society. In other words they all seek to maintain old American traditions and even though Joe and Tyler ultimately seem to seek an anarchistic "state," they are all keepers of American frontier traditions. For quite a while, popular culture, consumerism, capitalism, every man for himself, globalization and democracy are all values that the USA has exported to the rest of the world. However, the values the USA projects are two-sided. Individuality does not go well together with a globalized world where monocultures tend to develop. So the values that characterized America before the postwar period, concepts such as the American dream, personal freedom, and the western frontier spirit are the ones all my main characters try to represent to a smaller or larger degree. They do this partly as they have failed in the new world order, but does this make them old-fashioned stragglers? I do not believe so. While confronting the dominant norms of society, they created something new, namely a counter-culture, where each of these counter-cultures had their own newfound style of expression.

By not wanting to fit into a certain pattern created by an older generation, *On the Road* and *Generation X* show a high degree of tolerance and acceptance toward phenomena that mainstream society frowned upon. I have pointed out that most of the counter-cultural protests in these books (and in reality) seem to fail when they grow too large or when corporations try to co-opt and capitalize on them. This might be true, but what happens in reality is that they still push society forward. American society today is a lot more tolerant of previously taboo subjects like homosexuality and interracial marriage. When *the Catcher in the Rye* was published, it was banned in many American high schools and criticized for its profanity. In 2010 the cartoon show South Park created an episode where the children in South Park did not understand what was controversial about the book and sarcastically resort to "doing it better themselves" by writing a book called *Scrotie MCboogerballs*, which makes all parents vomit when they read it.¹³¹ It might be very silly, but it proves that these counter-cultural authors have spread far and wide and created increased acceptance in society. The possible downside is perhaps that to get attention now, one must resort to more extreme measures, which is exemplified by *Fight Club* and its violent themes. I believe these books in many ways tell sad stories, but benefit society

¹³¹ <http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s14e02-the-tale-of-scrotie-mcboogerballs>

as a whole, as they have led to a situation where acceptance of difference, tolerance and diversity are considered positive values.

All four books have been bestsellers, are considered classics and shocked the world when they were published. *Fight Club* was made into a highly successful Hollywood movie, and in less than a month *On the Road* will premiere at cinemas around the world. As stated before, when capitalists gain control over such provocative material I believe it tends to lose counter-cultural significance, but the upside is that exposure to people of mainstream society will perhaps spur some new attitudes and influence new ways of thought. It seems to me that it is more accepted today that teens and young adults have a counter-cultural period in life, because of these books. Such an acceptance may reduce the vitality of the protest, but indicates that these books broke down barriers and challenged norms.

The fact that the books from the 90's partly blame the 50's generation for their problems, as well as focusing on a feminization of society which the 50's protester do not, reveals some differences between these two generations. However, had it not been for the 50's protest which paved the way, there might not have been a Generation X, in the 90's. Had there not been such focus on personal freedom in the counter-culture from the 50's through the 80's, women would perhaps not have reached record high educational levels, which have led men to be trailing behind academically, thereby increasing focus on lost masculinity in the 90's protests. What gradually happened after *On the Road* and *The Catcher in the Rye* had reached so many people, was an increased acceptance for going against the grain. Jack Kerouac's Beat movement eventually died down and did not involve masses of people in the first place, but the hippie movement, which was largely inspired by the Beats, was enormous and left a huge legacy all over the western world, and so did Grunge 20 to 30 years later. In general many of the frustrations are the same, but the continuing interconnection with middle-class society proves that there still is a tug and pull for counter-cultural protesters to balance these worlds.

As all protests die down eventually, it shows that most people return to middle-class society, but perhaps with new experiences they can draw on in order to make the life they attempted to escape more bearable. The fact that all protesters from my books come from middle-class backgrounds also indicates that the protest is in some ways a luxury problem. Sal and Holden had time and motivation to seek an alternative, while Andy and Joe seek out an alternative because their lives became stagnant when they found out that all the luxury tended to trade human relationships with commodities and thereby curbed

happiness. The leisure time aspect comes in as a deciding factor here, I believe. Once young adults have to become economically responsible, they seem to discontinue their counter-cultural activity as leisure time is reduced and one has to take responsibility for oneself and perhaps a family. The fact that we in the western world reproduce later than in the 50's and tend to spend more time on education and self-realization, might perhaps describe why Joe and Andy are far older than Holden and why Generation X'ers have been described as immature by some of their critics.

In this chapter, where I summarize difference and similarities between the 50's and the 90's counter-culture, I have also discovered that *On the Road* and *Generation X* share similarities and so do *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Fight Club*. The first two books are focused around a group mentality; a group of people with an explorative mind who have a group mentality where they together can pick and choose what aspects of the modern world to keep or throw out, as they geographically and mentally seek to better their own world. It becomes a miniature social movement aimed at finding like-minded people to surround oneself with; these movements became so appealing in reality that they altered the Western world.

Fight Club and *The Catcher in the Rye* are in most ways very different, but the essence is that they are both about social deviants who are lonely. Joe might live with all his space monkeys and have a Fight Club to attend, but they are never personal relations, and the man behind these social institutions is his crazy alter ego, whom he has to kill off at the end. Joe and Holden both represent personal quests, and even though I am sure there are many like Holden out there, these two project more of a story about loneliness. The other two books seem to depict more of a social movement among relatively well-adjusted youth, while both Joe and Holden are so lonely in the mainstream world, that Holden wishes to vanish completely from it and Joe wishes to tear it down.

After five decades of different counter-cultural rebellions, I believe I can claim that the counter-culture has in many ways become as American as the values it fought to bring down. Today many counter-cultural aspects have blended with mainstream society, and individuality seems to have been reaffirmed as one can now mix and combine a cultural agenda to create an individual expression. My impression is that young urban inhabitants today can skateboard, listen to grunge, cherish Allen Ginsberg, and at the same time drive a fancy car and even work for a large corporation. All four counter-cultural novels might have helped to reinstate many of the older American values as well, except for one thing, with harder economic competition around the world and the new speed of media through

the Internet, most of us have definitely not returned to a simpler form of life. New forms of counter-culture appear continually, and the tug and pull between mainstream society and these often youth-driven movements continue to be among the defining realities of the 21st century.

In this thesis I have focused on the counter-cultural themes in each of my four novels. It might also be appropriate mention that at least as of 2012 we in the Western world almost expect a periodic rebellion from teenagers and young adults, maybe caused by a combination of alienation and insecurity about what path to choose in life, or in an attempt to find out what social group one fits in with. Fashion statements through clothing and music are common as well as oppositional behavior. This often only lasts a few years before one finds his or her place, calms down and contributes to society, but possibly with expanded horizons from experiences gained during this period. What I am attempting to say is that for example both Holden and Andy might really just be going through a short counter-cultural phase, which is seen as relatively common today, but was perhaps more unusual in both the fifties and nineties. In most of these books, friendship and love are just as important themes as rebellion, I believe. Sal and Dean, Joe and Tyler and Andy, Dag and Claire all cherish the friendship and experiences they have together, while Holden, Sal and Joe all search for love and compromise their counter-cultural activity in exchange for it.

Individuals might succeed in permanently living a counter-cultural lifestyle, in the books I have read, it is only indicated that Andy, Dag and Claire in *Generation X* might succeed at this, while the rest retreat before getting much older than 30. In reality, however, Kerouac, Salinger, Thoreau and others all suggest that one can continue living on the fringes of conventional society. Especially Salinger, Kerouac and Coupland all became highly critical of how the media and mainstream society adopted or twisted terms and expressions they and their followers had been using. This shows ownership, integrity and pride in their works, but the fact that terms and lifestyles are adopted from them into mainstream America also proves that their works and movements, at least to some extent, have become part of mainstream American culture. One example is the use of marijuana in *On the Road*. During the 50's this was so controversial that Kerouac called it Tea. Today a growing number of celebrities are open about their use of marijuana, several states have legalized its medicinal use, and in the fall of 2011 California nearly legalized it through a vote. Nudity and profanity are not as taboo as they were before, while atheism, Eastern religion, homosexuality and interracial relationships are all in general more widely

accepted than in postwar America. Besides this, we continually find new versions of protest against capitalism and consumerism, the latest one being the Occupy Wall Street protests and the 99 percent movement. In other words, even though the counter-cultural protest failed to sustain itself in three out of four of my novels, counter-cultural messages from these books are alive and well and still putting pressure on many of the same institutions Kerouac and Salinger began criticizing already in the 50's.

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